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The Bible interprets itself

How many times have you heard of someone who spent a frustrating evening assembling something only to find out that they had assembled it incorrectly? Of course, we all know the modern proverb "when all else fails, read the instructions."

This is also true when reading the Bible. A basic principle of reading the Bible more effectively lies in this simple fact:

Your questions about what the Bible teaches are answered in the Bible.

We know this sounds obvious. However, with human nature, the obvious solution is often our last resort. Reading the instructions first is the obvious solution to preventing frustration with most of life's projects.

Look in the same or surrounding chapters:

The explanation of a problem is sometimes to be found in the same chapter in which it occurs, or in a chapter nearby. For example:

- The parable of the Sower is presented in verses 3-8 of Matthew 13. The explanation of the parable that Christ gives to his disciples is ten verses later in verses 18-23.
- The account of Nebuchadnezzar's vision of a multi-metal image is in verses 31-35 of Daniel 2. It is interpreted in verses 36-45.

Look in other books of the Bible:

- In Exodus 3:4 we are told that a voice spoke to Moses out of a burning bush. If we compare that account with Acts 7:30-31 we find out that it was an angel.

How should we approach Bible reading?

If you are to gain anything from reading the Bible, you need to approach it with an open mind. If you read the Bible only to defend what you already think it says, then your understanding will have little chance of growing.

The Bible is a book that has withstood all kinds of attacks during its history. As in all other areas of study, Bible students build upon and re-evaluate the work of earlier students. You need not fear examining new ideas and evaluating them carefully in the light of all the teachings of the Bible.

TIP 2

Try to understand difficult passages by looking at the surrounding context.

You need to take time to meditate on what you are learning and to think through for yourself how what you have read can be applied in your own life. To do this, it can be helpful to share your ideas and interpretations with other Bible students for discussion and evaluation.

Bible study can be exhilarating and life changing. As you read and become more familiar with the Bible, it will become more alive and powerful in your life. Remember, God intended for you to understand this remarkable book and to meet Him in its pages.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN READING:

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| What is the main subject? | Are there any commandments or instructions? |
| Who are the main characters? | Are there errors to avoid? |
| Does it say anything about God? | Are there examples to follow? |
| Does it say anything about Christ? | What do I need to apply to my life today from this reading? |
| Is there a key verse? | |
| What is the central lesson? | |

The Jews and the Law of Moses

When reading the Bible, one cannot help but see that the Bible speaks not only about God's plan for mankind and this earth, but also that it follows the history of a particular people, the Jews. The Bible asserts that God's Word was specifically revealed to Israel (Psalm 147:19-20), and speaks of Israel as a people "near to" the LORD (Psalm 148:14). It outlines their birth as a people and nation and follows their development and the establishment of the Kingdom under David and Solomon. It records their steady decline and turning away from God, resulting in their exile from the land. But also prophecies about the regathering of the Jews to their land and their future reconciliation with God at the coming of Christ. One cannot understand the Bible unless one understands God's relationship with the Jews.

Who are the Jews?

1. The people: descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

- Abram (later called Abraham) is called by God: Genesis 12:1
- Abram is promised a seed and the land: Genesis 12:1-7; 13:14-17
- A covenant is made by God with Abraham: Genesis 15:1-18
- Promises are repeated to Isaac and Jacob: Genesis 26:1-5; 28:13
- Jacob's name becomes *Israel* ("Prince of God"): Genesis 32:24-32

2. The nation of Israel—established by God

- God delivers the people from Egypt under Moses: Exodus 1-14
- God chose the nation to represent Him: Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Exodus 19:3-6

What is the Law of Moses?

The Law of Moses consists of the commandments and laws given by God to the nation of Israel while encamped at Mt. Sinai. This is not only the Ten Commandments, but many other instructions for the people. It established:

1. An order of worship with:
 - a priesthood (the Levites)
 - a system of atonement (sacrifices)
 - a place of worship (the Tabernacle)
2. A means of government: • a theocracy (God is King)

The Law and the sacrificial system pointed to the work of Christ, and his sacrifice for all people (Hebrews 10:1).

A Law ahead of its time

There are several aspects of the Law of Moses which show how remarkable the Bible is, especially considering it was written thousands of years ago.

1. Isolation (*Leviticus 13:45,46*)

"Lepers" were commanded to live separately from the rest of the people. The Biblical term "leprosy" includes a whole group of infectious diseases, along with the

modern leprosy. The modern practice of isolating those with infectious diseases was derived directly from the Jews.

2. Washing after handling dead bodies (*Numbers 19:11-19*)

When a Jew had handled a dead body he was regarded as "unclean". He was to be quarantined for seven days, and had to undergo an elaborate washing procedure before he was regarded as fit to mix with society again. Until about a hundred years ago surgeons used to handle the dead and the dying and then go straight into the operating theatre without washing. Thousands of their patients died through infection. Many of them might have lived if those early surgeons had kept this principle from the Law of Moses.

3. Sanitation (*Deuteronomy 23:12,13*)

The Law of Moses had strict rules for disposal of sewage. It was not until the eighteenth century that Western Europe began to see the life-saving wisdom of this part of the Law. Even now some countries are still learning the wisdom of proper sewage disposal.

4. The Food Laws (*Deuteronomy 14:4-20*)

The Law of Moses provided lists of the birds, animals, insects and fish which could and could not

be eaten. With a few exceptions the lists agree with modern ideas about healthy and unhealthy food. The flesh-eating creatures, the rats, the reptiles and most insects are forbidden; the vegetarian birds and animals are permitted. The main differences from modern practice are that pork and shell-fish were forbidden by the Law, yet are eaten today. There were good reasons for the Law's strictness. Today public health inspectors, backed by an elaborate laboratory service, can ensure

that pigs and shellfish are reared under healthy conditions. The Israelites had no such facilities.

We know now that two serious diseases, cysticercosis and trichiniasis, can be caught through eating the flesh of pigs infected by parasitic worms. In a primitive society the only safe way to avoid these diseases was to steer clear of pork.

As for shellfish, they are quite harmless if they grow in water free from sewage. But if human excrement is present, they feed on it, and then may harbour the germs of typhoid and other intestinal diseases. Modern science helps us to take precautions against this, but the best thing for the Israelites was not to eat shellfish.

Critics of the Bible

We cannot be students of the Bible without recognizing the fact that such a book—one that claims divine inspiration—is under continuous attack by all types of critics. We acknowledge this, and though the scope of this course is not aimed at providing detailed answers to every criticism made by the Bible's detractors, we have attempted to summarize a few of the most common criticisms of the Bible.

CRITICISM:

The Bible is an ancient document written by primitive men who were only trying to force their will on others by claiming a book of divine origin. This makes the Bible nothing more than a compilation of crude facts, fiction, folklore and legend.

This criticism is countered by:

- Archaeology
- History
- Internal consistency of the record

CRITICISM:

The claim of the Bible to be an inspired revelation is an out-of-date concept in the light of "scientific" progress. Moreover, the prophetic predictions made in the Bible could have occurred due to coincidence or natural phenomena.

These criticisms are countered by:

- Fair application of scientific methods and principles
- The exact fulfilment of Biblical prophecy
- The realization that science itself is prone to obsolence and correction

Basic principles for reading the Bible

- 1** Study every passage within its literary context. Literary context includes both a text's immediate setting (the verses around it) and its relationship to the entire book.
- 2** Recognize that the cultural, social and historical environment represented in a biblical passage differs from that of today, and then try to understand a passage in light of those differences.
- 3** Translations often reflect the translator's understanding. Therefore, when studying a passage, compare several translations, or versions, to try and discover the most likely meaning of a word or phrase.
- 4** Interpret any single passage in light of what the author has written elsewhere.
- 5** Interpret the Bible as a whole. That is, interpret the Bible in light of the entire message of the Bible.

CRITICISM:

Even if the Bible were originally the inspired Word of God, translation, constant revision and textual corruption would remove any hope of using the Bible as a standard of life for all of mankind.

This criticism is disproved by:

- Bibliographical tests
- Discoveries of ancient texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls

The following is an article providing an example of archaeological evidence supporting the Bible.

Evidence at Jericho Supports Biblical Testimony

The stones cry out

One excellent example of archaeology supporting the truth of the Bible made headlines in the press a few short years ago. For several decades

the prevailing archaeological opinion about the ancient city of Jericho was that it had been destroyed about 1550 BC and that there was no fortified city in existence in the time of Joshua (conservative scholars date Joshua's destruction of Jericho at about 1400 BC). Kathleen Kenyon was the last archaeologist to do any serious, systematic excavating at the site of Jericho (Tell es-Sultan), and this was during the years 1952 to 1958. It was her interpretations and conclusions, including the 1550 BC destruction date, which remained normative and virtually unchallenged until 1990. No matter how one works the Biblical chronologies and the dates, the 1550 BC date is simply too early to coincide with the Biblical record. In fact, this date flatly contradicts the Word of God.

However, a recent reevaluation of the archaeological data not only supports a 1400 BC date for Jericho's destruction, but provides evidence that matches the Biblical account on every detail. Because of the very professional and precise methods of recording an archaeological dig, other archaeologists not involved in the initial excavation can evaluate the published reports and interpret the evidence without even visiting the site. Near Eastern Studies scholar Bryant G. Wood (then of the University of Toronto), published these findings in the March/April 1990 issue of *Biblical Archaeological Review*. Wood's own summary of his conclusions is as follows:

Correlation between the archaeological evidence and the biblical narrative is substantial:

- The city was strongly fortified (Joshua 2:5,7,15, 6:5,20)
- The attack occurred just after harvest time in the spring (Joshua 2:6,3:15, 5:10)
- The inhabitants had no opportunity to flee with their foodstuffs (Joshua 6:1)
- The siege was short (Joshua 6:15)
- The walls were levelled, possibly by an earthquake (Joshua 6:20)
- The city was not plundered (Joshua 6:17-18)
- The city was burned (Joshua 6:24)

To arrive at the c. 1400 BC date, Wood took into consideration four lines of evidence: ceramic data (pottery fragments), stratigraphy, scarab evidence (Egyptian amulets with inscriptions) and radiocarbon dating. When analysing the pottery fragments found at Tell es-Sultan (Wood is an expert in ceramic seriation), he found that the most recent artifacts at the destruction level were from the Late Bronze I period (which agrees with the 1400 BC date), rather than the Middle Bronze III period (which Kenyon suggested). With regard to stratigraphy, Wood found that there were too many habitation layers to support a 1550 BC destruction date. Wood also noticed that the Egyptian scarab amulets (which can be dated by the names of reigning Pharaohs inscribed on them) found at the site were in a continuous series from the 18th century BC to the early 14th century BC. Finally, Wood cites the evidence of a Carbon-14 dating sample, taken from the destruction debris, which was dated at 1410 BC (plus or minus forty years). All this evidence strongly supports the later c. 1400 BC date.

Perhaps most interesting of all is that the archaeological evidence points not only to a c. 1400 BC date, but a particular kind of destruction, which accurately correlates with the Joshua account. Kenyon concluded that the city had been destroyed by either the Hyksos (a Semitic people) or the Egyptians, but Wood points to several considerations that argue against this. For example, the Egyptians are known to have customarily laid siege to cities just prior to harvest, when food stores were at their lowest. Thus the Egyptian army could harvest the fields to feed their own troops, and put the inhabitants of the city in peril of starvation. However, the archaeological excavation yielded evidence of much stored grain, indicating both an attack just after harvest and



