

# Reading the Bible

Advance in Faith Unit 107



**Lesson 6      Difficult Scriptures**

Regardless of how closely we follow the questions and framework presented over the last few weeks there will always be difficult passages of scripture where we struggle to understand what God had intended for us as His message.

One of these areas is the area of apocalyptic text which is most often connected to eschatology.

## 1. Eschatology

The word “Eschatology” comes from two Greek words: one means “last” or “end”, and the other means “word” or “saying”. So “Eschatology” means “a word about the last things” or “sayings about the end”.

This does not necessarily mean the ‘end of time’ or the ‘end of the world’ but rather the end of a particular focus, period of time, way of doing things, etc. For example there is a sense of eschatological text scattered throughout the Old Testament especially within the Major Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, but this does not point forward to the end of the world but to the end of the period for the Jews of waiting for the Messiah and/or their return from exile.

## 2. So How does the Book of Revelation Fit?

Many people understand it as describing events that will happen in the future. But if it was just about the future (i.e. *our* future), we have to ask why anyone in the first century would have bothered to keep it.

“The book of Revelation ... is a book that must be appreciated through the faculty of intuition. We must listen to the feelings in it, and allow ourselves to see the visions, and hear the sounds. It is a drama which must, so to speak, be seen on the big stage, and loses its effect if it is studied by

nit-picking students who want to use it for forming doctrines.<sup>1</sup>

Remember a basic principle of interpreting the Bible is: Whatever it means for us will be consistent with what it meant for the author and the original readers. **For us but not to us.**

So in trying to understand what the Book of Revelation means for us we have to start with: What did the author intend? What did it mean for the people to whom it was written?

### 3. Genre

Revelation is a unique, finely blended combination of three distinct literary types: apocalypse, prophecy and letter.

#### *(a) Apocalypse*

Introduced as “The revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1) – ‘revelation’ is a translation of the Greek word; “apocalypse” is a transliteration. (This is where you exchange a letter in one language for the corresponding letter in another language. E.g. X in Greek for ‘ch’ in English)

#### *Genre of Apocalypse:*

- A literary work with a story framework that is told by a heavenly being to a human recipient through visions and/or a heavenly journey.
- Reveals secrets regarding a transcendent (out of this world) reality, and envisages eschatological (last days) salvation
- Makes use of symbols – numbers, animals, etc.
- Pseudonymous – written in the name of a hero of old – Adam, Abraham, Moses, Enoch...
- Flourished 200 BC to 200 AD

The book of Revelation has a lot in common with the genre of “Apocalypse”, but it is not seen as pseudonymous, that is

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<sup>1</sup> M. Mitton, *The Sounds of God: Hearing the Voice of God* (Guildford: Thompson Press, 1993).

written in the name of someone. Also, a past event (Jesus' death and resurrection), rather than a future event, is the basis of hope.

**(b) Prophecy**

Described as prophecy because "the time is near".

"Prophecy" – a proclamation of God's perspective – a "word of the Lord" breaking into the situation of God's people.

Includes a blessing for those who "hear and who keep what is written in it" (1:3) – it was meant to be read in public worship – it is to be heard and obeyed.

Much interpretation has focused on it as "prophecy" – for the future (particularly, *our* future).

**(c) Letter**

Standard opening – "John to the seven churches that are in Asia" (1:4)

Followed by a Thanksgiving/Doxology (1:4-8).

Typical closing with admonition and benediction (22:8-21).

**(d) Conclusions regarding Genre**

Revelation needs to be read with the historical context in mind – the prophetic and apocalyptic need to be read through the lens of being a letter to real people in real situations.

It is a combination of genres and changes from one genre to another – so we need to keep genre in mind when interpreting.

## 4. Other Difficult Passages

### *A/ The Matthew and Luke Genealogies*

The gospels of Matthew and Luke establish the ancestry of Jesus but through very different descriptions. The difficulty arises in that

both passages, Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:21-38, present a different view of Jesus' ancestry.

Matthew works forward from Abraham to Jesus via his earthly father Joseph.

Luke works backwards, again through Joseph, all the way to Adam.

However neither genealogy agrees with the other!

Matthew's goal was to present to his readers, who were firstly Jewish, the kingship of Jesus. Throughout the gospel we find the theme of the King and Kingship emphasised.

the messianic King, inaugurating the time of God's kingly rule—4:12–7:29, proclamation of and life in the kingdom; 8:1–10:42, the power and mission of the kingdom; 11:1–13:52, questioning and opposition to the kingdom and its mixed reception in the world; 13:53–18:35, growing opposition, confession by the disciples, and special instructions to the community of the King;<sup>2</sup>

So Matthew's use of the names in his genealogy fits this theme. He begins with the first covenant promise through Abraham, Genesis 17:3-8, and continues through to King David. Jesus, Matthew announces is David's descendant.

But that's what Matthew does, on Jesus' behalf. And, as though to emphasize that Jesus isn't just one member in an ongoing family, but actually the goal of the whole list, he arranges the genealogy into three groups of 14 names—or, perhaps we should say, into six groups of seven names. The number seven was and is one of the most powerful symbolic numbers, and to be born at the beginning of the seventh seven in the sequence is clearly to be the climax of the whole list. This birth,

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book : A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), 270.

Matthew is saying, is what Israel has been waiting for two thousand years.<sup>3</sup>

However Matthew also includes a number of strange connections, Tamar, Boaz and Solomon are outside the norm.

Luke's goal is to present the story of Jesus as Messiah of the whole world and so his genealogy goes back to Adam.

Perhaps it is best to see the family tree, stretching back to the creation of the world, as a way of saying that, though Jesus is indeed the **Messiah** of Israel (another meaning of 'son of God'), he is so precisely for the whole world. All creation, the whole human race, will benefit from what he has come to do.<sup>4</sup>

While these ideas help explain the two lists they do not wholly explain the differences in them. Perhaps each author chose a different life to follow in their quest to use the list as a statement of their goal for their gospel, which would be in keeping with the rules of first century story writing.

## *B/ Slavery in Scripture*

### *Old Testament*

Both the Old and New Testaments deal in some way with the issue of slavery. Neither condemns the practice as many modern people think should be the case.

However biblical texts dealing with slavery need to be considered within the cultural environment of the times in which they were actioned.

Israel had 2 types of slavery; economic slaves and foreign prisoners of war.

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 40.

Economic slaves were fellow Israelites who found themselves in need of raising capital and the only asset they had was their own labour. This is more like indentured servanthood than the slavery of the 17<sup>th</sup> century practiced by European countries.

No matter the type of slave, the OT established very different rules in dealing with slaves than the cultures around them.

Exodus 21 sets out clearly the ways in which slaves are to be treated. Even runaway slaves were treated with a great deal of difference by Israel to the other nations.

While other ANE cultures may too have prohibited kidnapping, the Mosaic Law stands out in sharp moral contrast to their standard extradition treaties for, and harsh treatment of, runaway slaves. Hammurabi called for the death penalty to those helping runaway slaves. Israel, however, was to offer safe harbor to foreign runaway slaves (Deut. 23:15-16).<sup>5</sup>

#### *New Testament*

Paul is often criticized for not advocating the destruction of slavery. However he does make some revolutionary statements in regards to the treatment of slaves.

But Paul addresses them (Eph. 5-6) as full moral beings and puts their obedience, demanded by their culture, into a wider theological context. Obedience now has a higher meaning, and they must make decisions regarding it and set limits to it (although in setting limits they will probably face suffering). Paul has raised the status of the subordinate to that of a full human being before God, yet he has done this without calling for rebellion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Copan, *Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?* <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=45&ap=1> Accessed 20/12/10. P7

<sup>6</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce and Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 643.

Paul also places the masters on notice that their treatment of slaves needs to be in a way that considers the slaves to be fully human.

The master is to treat slaves appropriately in the light of knowing that in reality both he and they are slaves of the same heavenly Master (Eph 6:9).<sup>7</sup>

It is also interesting to realise that within the Roman Empire slaves had the opportunity to gain their freedom quite regularly and so become a part of the society in which they lived. Many examples of this are found in the archaeological finds within the city of Rome itself.

### *C/ Paul and the Role of Women*

This continues to be an area of discussion within many churches. The discussion comes from the following passages; 1 Cor. 11:2-16 and 14:23

The first passage speaks about head covering for both men and women; the second speaks of women keeping silent.

How do we deal with these?

1. There is a cultural aspect to this discussion as seen in chapter 11. There are some cultural norms that apply and need to be taken into consideration within the church that is growing within the culture.
  - a. In Paul's culture a rule was not always a rule. See chapter 14.
  - b. The idea of honour and dishonour was very strong in the first century and Paul was attempting to deal with the cultural aspect of the church.
  - c. Verses 11 and 12 set the framework by which all the other statements should be viewed.
2. With regards to chapter 14 when read in the light of chapter 11 it is clear that Paul does not expect women to be silent in church otherwise he would not have spoken about how they should have their hair when they prophesy. So a number of explanations exist;
  - a. These verses, 34-35, do not occur in some of the old manuscripts so that some bible scholars argue that they were added and that Paul did not write them, but they were added by a scribe who was anxious to keep male leadership in the church exclusive.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 643.

- b. The context of the whole passage is that worship be done orderly and to the building up of the church.
  - i. It may have been that the service time was conducted in the Greek language and that the women attending may not have understood Greek and so were speaking amongst themselves to figure out what was being said and so making a disturbance.
  - ii. It may have been that when prophecy was being given by both men and women, that the spouse of the person prophesying may have wished to 'discuss' the prophecy with their spouse in light of what may have been happening at home. (verse 29)

What is clear is that this is a particular problem posed from within the cultural setting of the time, and that Paul's overriding concern (if the passage is indeed written by him) is for order, peace and mutual upbuilding when the congregation comes together for worship, rather than for chaos, interruption and dissension.<sup>8</sup>

### *D/ War in the OT*

One of the biggest stumbling blocks for people reading the OT is the seemingly constant warring that happened, often at the behest of Yahweh.

The following points need to be considered when thinking about the 'war culture' of the OT;

1. Israel's wars were only considered appropriate if they were at Yahweh's command. Yahweh's command was issued in light of the immorality of the offending culture.
2. The 'obliteration' language of Joshua is clearly hyperbole. Compare Joshua 10:40 with 23:12-13.
3. The war was more concerned with the removal of the idolatrous practices of the nations than the nations themselves. See Deut. 7

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 200.

## Conclusion

Reading the Bible is not like reading “See Spot run”; and nor is it meant to be like this. We must bring to our study of scripture our trust in the guiding of the Holy Spirit and an appropriate range of ‘tools’ by which we can ask appropriate questions and gain acceptable and sustainable answers.

I hope that you learn to enjoy the thrill of bible study as I have and continue to seek to understand how scripture guides us to live out the kingdom of God here on earth.

## Group Questions

These questions come from the book by E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*.

1. Verry was one of my (Randy’s) fellow professors in Indonesia. Verry wasn’t originally from Manado, where we were teaching together. One day I asked, “How does a fellow from [his remote island] end up in Manado?” Verry said that as a young man, he had hitched a ride on a boat and was headed to Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, to seek his fortune. As a stowaway, he was put off the boat in Manado. Having no money (this being before the days of cell phones), Verry remembered his grandfather once saying that they had relatives in some mountain village near Manado. Several days and many questions later, Verry was knocking on a door in a small village. When the man answered, Verry said, “I am the son of ..., who is the son of ..., whose brothers were ...” The man asked some more questions. After about five minutes, they determined that Verry was remotely related. They took Verry in. He lived there for eight years! After all, they were kin. Most American Christians would be unwilling to live with that sort of obligation. It isn’t practical. Imagine what could happen, we would argue. We might see Indonesians as impractical, but they might see us as *unchristian*.

What are a Christian’s responsibilities to her or his family? Do you think our sense of obligation to family should be determined by culture or by Scripture?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, [Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 111–112.

2. Westerners are wired, by virtue of our worldview, to seek cause-and-effect connections in everything. We instinctively ask, “Why did this happen?” When we read the story of Job, for example, we tend to emphasize why these things happened to Job. We may be emphasizing the wrong point. Job never does know why those things happened.

How might Job’s experience help us face life, since we also are rarely told by God why things happen?<sup>10</sup>

3. Imagine retelling the story of Ruth and Boaz today and saying, “Boaz the Israeli” and “Ruth the Palestinian.”

How might that affect how you read the story?<sup>11</sup>

4. The people who lived in Philippi were settled there by Rome. They were Roman citizens. Not just citizens of the Roman Empire, they were considered citizens of the actual city of Rome. They were quite proud of their Rome citizenship. And they didn’t care for Jews. Note how they used the term *Jews* to fire up the crowd against Paul (Acts 16:20).

How does this affect how you read Philippians 3:20?<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, [Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blindness to Better Understand the Bible](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 69.

<sup>11</sup> E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, [Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blindness to Better Understand the Bible](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 69.

<sup>12</sup> E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, [Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blindness to Better Understand the Bible](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 69.