

2 - SETTING THE CONTEXT

Introduction

1. Earlier, we noted that the fundamental reasons for the neglect and misinterpretation of Revelation "is that modern Christians in general simply do not know what to make of this kind of literature." (Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 11.)
2. We noted further the implications of acknowledging this point for our current study.
 - a. If the problem with studying the book is that people don't understand the background well enough (or properly) to get the right teaching from the book, then it stands to reason that we must begin by providing that foundation and framework.
 - b. In an earlier writing, D. S. Russell notes that the apocalyptic books "cannot be understood apart from the religious, political and economic circumstances of the times, nor can the times themselves be understood apart from these books whose hopes and fears echo and re-echo the faith of God's chosen people" (*The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, 16, in Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 26).
3. For various reasons ranging from time to the mistaken notion that such an approach is just "too deep", we have not traditionally spent as much time as we need to in considering the matter of how to interpret a book.¹
4. In this presentation, we are particularly concerned with the issues of contextual interpretation, both literary and historical.²
5. (Note: I acknowledge that this may be a review for some, but believe it is necessary to be sure everyone has a proper foundation. Besides, a review seldom hurts.)

Discussion

- I. Literary and Historical Interpretation in General.
 - A. We are somewhat familiar with the importance of keeping things in context (e.g., the complaint from politicians and celebrities when they are quoted out of context), but need to keep in mind certain general principles in order to avoid sloppiness in our interpretation.

¹ Teachers usually utilize the basic principles, but often do not call attention to them. Because of this, the impression is sometimes left that arbitrary decisions have been made regarding the interpretation of a given text. In the interest of equipping believers, we should spend some time on such themes. This presentation will not satisfy that need completely, for it serves merely to introduce this particular study. But it is a start which might well be followed up elsewhere.

² Clearly, some attention also needs to be given to the procedures for interpreting figures and symbols. We will address these matters more in our specific introduction to the book.

1. First, we must appreciate the basic principle that "*a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or readers*" (Fee & Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 60).
 - a) It is simply not fair to any speaker or writer, in any era or any volume, to assign meanings to something to satisfy our own desires or ideas.
 - b) Because of our legitimate efforts to apply God's Holy Word to the modern day, and a tendency to see the world from our own unique perspective, it is easy to forget four important characteristics about biblical writings (Quotations in the following points are from John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook*, 15-16).
 - (1) "None of the Bible was originally addressed to the modern reader and interpreter." We are, in a sense, "reading someone else's mail." This is not to say that there is no application, that it is only historical, only that we need to exercise caution in making passages mean things which would have not fit the original period.
 - (2) "None of the Bible was originally composed in a modern language." Hence, we must always ask what terms would have meant to the audience which first heard/read them, not what they mean to us.³
 - (3) "The modern readers of the Bible and the original readers of the texts are separated by an enormous cultural gap." Most of Scripture is not written to western man, let alone modern man. Effort has to be made to get into the cultural shoes of the readers, a challenging task when we are contemporary with the culture being addressed, but even more so when point four is taken into account.
 - (a) Illustration: A U. S. president once visited a foreign country where he made a gesture which upset the native people. He did not intend to be offensive. The gesture he used is perfectly acceptable, even positive, in the United States, but in the country he was visiting it is offensive. The cultural difference -- and the President's failure to be aware of it -- deeply offended his hosts.
 - (b) Illustration: When I was in college, a girl I knew was getting ready to travel overseas with a school group. She told me that, before the trip, the girls were cautioned not to plan to a certain color of clothing because, while acceptable in the U. S., the color had a very different connotation where they were going.
 - (4) "The historical gap that separates the present from the world of the Bible ranges from almost twenty centuries to over three millennia."
 - (a) This means that we must appreciate the importance of understanding a different time in order to understand the meaning of a passage. Again, we can illustrate the point with a fairly common example. The spiritual song, "Get Right Church" refers to the excitement and anticipation of taking the right train home. Teaching that song to elementary schoolers in the space age, I found it necessary to explain the frame of reference in the slave culture of the 19th century where getting on a train and going away from the plantation

³ The best approach for most students for dealing with this fact is to read from different translations and then consult a few useful commentators who will help sort through such issues. Admittedly, some are more technical, but not all are. A little study can yield great results.

expressed the deepest longing of a field worker. Only after this cross-cultural meaning is appreciated can the song be sung with meaning today.

- (b) It also means that there are different historical periods which must be taken into account for different parts of the Bible. While things in antiquity did not change as rapidly as they do now, there still is no single historical period encompassed in Bible texts.
2. Careful interpretation with meaningful application demands that we develop a common world with the texts we interpret.
 - a) Understand that God did not use a special, holy method of communication; in fact, he used several, all of which were similar to what the people of the times in question were accustomed (cf. Fee & Stuart, 20).
 - b) But we must not imagine that recognizing this fact means that we have solved the problem posed for interpretation.
 - (1) Think of the communication difficulties we have with people who share the same language and general frame of reference; even when we use terms in approximately the same way, communication often gets jumbled.
 - (2) The effort needed where the Bible is concerned is appreciated in view of this fact. Hayes and Holladay summarize the point: "The greater the difference between their normal fields of discourse and the greater the disparity between their modes of experience, the greater will be the difficulty of their communication" (8).
 - (3) We must not minimize the importance of seeking to establish a common world or frame of reference, for "generally most documents [even modern ones] are best understood when the sender has some prior knowledge of the receiver and the receiver has some prior acquaintance with the sender" (Hayes & Holladay, 9).

B. Literary Context.

1. This is what we most often mean when we talk about context. "This is *the* crucial task in exegesis, and fortunately it's something one can do well without necessarily having to consult the 'experts'" (Fee & Stuart, 24).
2. Literary context "means that words only have meaning in sentences, and for the most part biblical sentences only have meaning in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences" (Ibid.).⁴
3. Key questions to ask include:
 - a) What's the point?
 - b) What is the author trying to say and why does he say it right here?

⁴ An important point to keep in mind is that, with most styles of biblical literature, it is important to think in paragraphs when doing literary contextual analysis. Fee & Stuart make two compelling observations in this respect:

"One of the major causes of inadequate exegesis by readers of the King James Version, and to a lesser degree of the New American Standard, is that every verse has been printed as a paragraph. Such an arrangement tends to obscure the author's own logic. Above all else, therefore, one must learn to recognize units of thought, whether they be paragraphs (for prose) or lines and sections (for poetry). And, with the aid of an adequate translation, this is something the reader can do" (24).

Specifically relative to the Epistles, but a comment valuable for all interpretation, is this one: "We simply cannot stress enough the importance of your learning to THINK PARAGRAPHS, and not just as natural units of thought, but as the absolutely necessary key to understanding the argument in the various Epistles" (51).

- c) Having made the point, what is he saying next and why?
- 4. An important thing to remember relative to context has to do with the meaning of words: "the texts in which a term occurs provide the context in which it should be understood" (Hayes & Holladay, 57). Put another way, the final determinant for a term's meaning is ultimately the context where that word is used.

C. Historical Context.

1. The basic principle here is that these writings came from a different time period, the customs of which were understood by their original readers (and so are not always explained -- cf. Mark 7:1ff. for an exception), but must be discerned by us.
2. The study of this particular area "seeks to overcome the historical and cultural gaps in interpreting ancient documents as well as the third-party perspective of the interpreter" (Hayes & Holladay, 42).
3. The following matters are of concern when considering the historical context issue (quotations are from Fee & Stuart, 23-24).
 - a) There is "the time and culture of the author and his readers, that is, the geographical, topographical, and political factors that are relevant to the author's setting."
 - b) "The more important question of historical context, however, has to do with the *occasion* and *purpose* of each biblical book and/or of its various parts."
 - (1) What was going on in the lives of the audience which called for this document to be written?
 - (2) What situation in the author's life caused him to write it?
 - (3) The answers to these questions are generally best found in the writing itself, particularly for those who learn to read with their eyes open to such matters.
4. Techniques for getting into the historical setting of a document (quotations from Fee & Stuart, 46-47).
 - a) "First, you need to consult your Bible dictionary or the Introduction to your commentary to find out as much as possible" about the setting for the document.
 - b) "Second, and now especially for study purposes, you need to develop the habit of reading the whole [document] through in one sitting.... *nothing* can ever substitute for this exercise" (particularly with letters, for this is how we read letters generally).

II. The Intertestamental Context for Revelation.

A. The importance of this period for a study of Revelation.

1. Revelation is an example of a type of literature called "apocalyptic" literature, "a literature of crisis to which it responded with confidence and courage: evil could not and would not prevail" (D. S. Russell, *Prophecy and the Apocalyptic Dream*, 19).
 - a) Obviously, some understanding of the sort of crisis which produced this body of literature (of which Revelation is but one isolated example) will help us understand the framework for the book in a manner which more closely approximates what its original readers would have just known (i.e., it would have been "part of the air").
 - b) As Bruce Metzger has written, "Apocalyptic literature among the Jews contained weird symbols of mythological beasts representing nations and individuals. The meaning of such imagery must have been as clear to the original reading public of