

Bible 101

How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth

Acts & Revelation

Acts

- Hermeneutical challenge of Acts vs. other narratives; we treat Acts narratives, selectively, as normative (112-113)
- Our present interest, therefore, is to help you read and study the book alertly, to help you to look at the book in terms of *Luke's* interests, and to spur you to ask some new kinds of questions as you read.
(114)

- For [Luke], the divine activity that began with Jesus and continues through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church is a continuation of God's story that began in the Old Testament. Therefore, making note of Luke's own theological interests is of special importance as you read or study Acts. (114-115)
- [B]ecause of the significance of Luke's purpose for hermeneutics, it is especially important that you keep [the question of Luke's intent] before you as you read or study at the exegetical level. (115)

- Assignment:
 1. Read Acts all the way through in one or two sittings
 2. As you read, make mental notes of such things as key people and places, recurring motifs, and natural divisions of the book
 3. Now, go back and skim read, and jot down with references your previous observations
 4. Ask yourself, why did Luke write this book? And consider why *this* particular narrative has been included. (115)

- On the basis of this clue, Acts can be seen to be composed of six sections that give the narrative a continual forward movement from its Jewish setting based in Jerusalem with Peter as its leading figure, toward a predominantly Gentile church, with Paul as the leading figure, and with Rome, the capital of the Gentile world, as the goal. (116)

- Acts 1:1 - 6:7: Primitive church in Jerusalem
- Acts 6:8 - 9:31: First expansion by 'Hellenists'
- Acts 9:32 - 12:24: First expansion to Gentiles
- Acts 12:25 - 16:5: First expansion into Gentile world
- Acts 16:6 - 19:20: Further westward expansion
- Acts 19:21 - 28:30: Paul & gospel on to Rome (116-117)

- As you read you should also notice that our description of the content omits one crucial factor—indeed *the* crucial factor—namely, the role of the Holy Spirit in all of this. You will notice as you read that at every key juncture, in every key person, the Holy Spirit plays the absolutely leading role. According to Luke, all of this forward movement did not happen by human design; it happened because God willed it and the Holy Spirit carried it out. (117-118)

Luke's Purpose:

1. [O]n the basis of structure and content alone, any statement of purpose that does not include the Gentile mission and the Holy Spirit's role in that mission will surely have missed the point of the book.
2. [H]e has no interest in the "lives," that is, biographies, of the apostles. [.....] [H]e has little or no interest in church organization or polity. [.....] [T]here is no word about other geographical expansion except in the one direct line from Jerusalem to Rome.

3. Luke's interest also does not seem to be in standardizing things, bringing everything into uniformity.
4. Luke, therefore, probably intended that the ongoing church should be "like them," but in the larger sense of proclaiming the good news to the entire world, not by modelling itself on any specific example. (118-119)

- [T]he contextual questions one must repeatedly ask in Acts include: What is the point of this narrative or speech? How does it function in Luke's total narrative? Why has he included it here? You can usually answer these questions provisionally after one or two careful readings. Sometimes, however, especially in Acts, you will need to do some outside reading to answer some of the *content* questions before you can feel confident you are on the right track. (120)

- We grant that exegesis of this kind, which pursues the *what* and *why* of Luke's narrative, is not necessarily devotionally exciting, but we would argue that it is the mandatory first step to the proper hearing of Acts as God's word. Not every sentence in every narrative or speech is necessarily trying to tell *us* something. But every sentence in every narrative or speech contributes to what God is trying to say as a whole through Acts. In the process we can learn from the individual narratives about the variety of ways and people God uses to get his task accomplished.
(123)

- [D]oes the book of Acts provide information that not only describes the primitive church but speaks as a norm to the church at all times? (124)
- Our assumption, shared by many others, is this: *Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative way—unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way.* (124)

- [A]lmost everything Christians derive from Scripture by way of precedent is in our third category—Christian experience or practice—and always at the secondary level. (125)

Hermeneutical Principles of Historical Narrative:

1. The word of God in Acts that may be regarded as normative for Christians is related primarily to what any given narrative *was intended* to teach.
2. What is incidental to the primary intent of the narrative may indeed reflect an inspired authorial understanding, but it does not have the same teaching value as what the narrative was intended to teach.

3. [I]f it can be shown that the purpose of a given narrative is to *establish* precedent, then such precedent should be regarded as normative. (127)

Hermeneutics of Biblical Precedents:

1. It is probably never valid to use an analogy based on biblical precedent as giving biblical authority for present-day actions.
2. [B]iblical narratives do have illustrative and (sometimes) “pattern” value. [.....] If one wishes to use a biblical precedent to justify some present action, one is on safer ground if the principle of the action is taught elsewhere, where it is the primary intent so to teach.

3. In matters of Christian experience, and even more so of Christian practice, biblical precedents may sometimes be regarded as repeatable patterns—even if they are not understood to be normative.
(128-130)

Revelation

- Most of the problems stem from the symbols, plus the fact that the book often deals with future events, while at the same time it is set in a recognizable first-century context. The problem is also related to the thoroughgoing way that John sees everything in light of the Old Testament, which he cites or echoes over 250 times, so that every significant moment in his narrative is imaged almost exclusively in Old Testament language. (258)

- It seems necessary to say at the outset that no one should approach Revelation without a proper degree of humility! There are already too many books on “Revelation Made Easy.” But it is not easy. (259)
- [E]xegesis comes first, and in this case exegesis is especially crucial, for this is a book on which a lot of popular books and pamphlets have been written. In almost every case, the popular books do no exegesis at all. (259)

- Revelation is a unique, finely blended combination of three distinct literary types: apocalypse, prophecy, and letter. Furthermore, the basic type—apocalypse—is a literary form that does not exist in our own day. (259)

Common Characteristics of Apocalypses:

1. [Apocalypse's] great concern was no longer with God's activity *within* history. **DISAGREE!!**
2. [A]n apocalypse is a form of literature. It has a particular written structure and form.
3. Most frequently the "stuff" of apocalyptic is presented in the form of visions and dreams, and its language is cryptic and symbolic.

4. The images of apocalyptic are often forms of fantasy rather than reality.
 5. [T]he final product usually has the visions in carefully arranged, often numbered sets. Frequently these sets when put together, express something without necessarily trying to suggest that each separate picture follows hard on the heels of the former. (261)
- Revelation is not pseudonymous. (261)

- On the one hand, the book is cast in the apocalyptic mold and has most of the literary characteristics of apocalypse. [...] On the other hand, John clearly intends this apocalypse to be a prophetic word to the church. (262)
- The significance of [Revelation cast in the form of a letter] is that, as with all epistles, there is an *occasional* aspect to Revelation. (262)

Basic Exegetical Principles:

1. *[T]he primary meaning of Revelation is what John intended it to mean, which in turn must also have been something his readers could have understood it to mean.*
2. Scripture is to be interpreted in the light of other Scripture. [...] However, to interpret Scripture by Scripture must not be tilted in such a way that one *must* make other Scriptures the hermeneutical keys to unlock Revelation.

3. Suggestions for exegetical difficulties:
 - a. *One must have a sensitivity to the rich background of ideas that have gone into the composition of Revelation.*
 - b. *Apocalyptic imagery is of several kinds.*
 - c. *When John himself interprets his images, these interpreted images must be held firmly and must serve as a starting point for understanding other images.*
 - d. *One must see the visions as wholes and not allegorically press all the details.*

4. John expects his readers to hear his echoes of the Old Testament as the continuation—and consummation—of that story. [...] Good exegesis of the book of Revelation, therefore, requires one to be constantly aware of these Old Testament echoes, since in the vast majority of instances the Old Testament context of these echoes gives you clues as to how John intends his own images and pictures to be understood.
5. Apocalypses in general, and Revelation in particular, seldom intend to give a detailed chronological account of the future. (263-266)

- [T]ry to read it all the way through in one sitting. [.....] [A]s you read, make some mental or brief written notes about the author and his readers. Then go back a second time and specifically pick up all the references that indicate John's readers are companions in his suffering (1:9). (266)
- To confuse ["tribulation" and "wrath"] and make them refer to the same thing will cause one to become hopelessly muddled as to what is being said. (267)

- To understand any one of the specific visions in the book of Revelation it is especially important not only to wrestle with the background and meaning of the images but also to ask how this particular vision *functions* in the book as a whole. (268)

Structure:

1. Chapters 1-3: stage & characters
2. Chapters 4-5: further stage setting
3. Chapters 6-7: begin unfolding drama
4. Chapters 8-11: God's temporal judgments on Rome
5. Chapter 12: theological key of the book
6. Chapters 13-14: Satan's vengeance via Rome (268-270)

Hermeneutical Principles:

1. We need to learn that pictures of the future are just that—pictures.
2. Some of the pictures that were intended primarily to express the certainty of God’s judgment must not also be interpreted to mean “*soon-ness*,” at least “soon-ness” from our limited perspective.
3. The pictures where the “temporal” is closely tied to the “eschatological” should not be viewed as simultaneous—even though the original readers themselves may have understood them in this way.

4. Although there are probably many instances where there is a second, yet-to-be-fulfilled dimension to the pictures, we have been given no keys as to how we are to pin these down.
 5. The pictures that were intended to be totally eschatological are still to be taken so. (272-273)
- Until Christ comes, we live out the future in the already, and we do so by hearing and obeying his word. (273)