

PRINCIPLE III - DETERMINE THE HISTORICAL SETTING

The books of the Bible were originally written in specific historical settings. If an interpreter does not give heed to this fact, he will necessarily be guilty of arbitrarily transferring the author, his writing and readers to the present. The Scriptures, of course, do speak very forcefully and clearly to 20th century humanity. But to be properly applied today, they must first be understood in light of the historical situation in which they were written.

The primary source of information about the setting of a book is usually the book itself. However, it is important to realize that determining the historical setting of any document necessitates careful attention to several elements. These are depicted by the following diagram. A writing is conditioned by all of these elements. These various factors overlap and are really inseparable. In interpreting a specific statement, one factor may be more crucial than another, but all are essential for a comprehensive understanding of the Bible.

The Author

It is very helpful to know something about the author in interpreting a specific book of the Bible. For example, we can ask -

-who was he? Sometimes the author names himself; other times he furnishes sufficient biographical data to enable us to identify him (for example, John the apostle in the fourth gospel).

-what can be known of his life and character? What was he like? Can we describe his temperament, his disposition, his modes of thought? What was his profession? What were his motives in life? Did he have obvious weaknesses? strengths?

-what were the circumstances under which he wrote? Where does the writing fit into his life and ministry? How does his location, associations, and frame of mind affect his message?

Illustration - A knowledge that 2 Timothy is Paul's last epistle, written to one of his closest friends and associates from prison, is invaluable in entering into Paul's thought and frame of mind in that letter. Jeremiah wrote Lamentations following the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians. Awareness of this background is essential to understanding that poem.

The Readers

It is also helpful to seek to discover all one can about the readers of the biblical writing. One should ask -

-who were they? Often they are unspecified; sometimes we must surmise who they were.

-what was their geographical location? What was it like where they lived?

-what was their life situation? What kind of political system held sway where they lived? What was their spiritual condition? Where did they fit in their society? How did they earn their living? How did they educate their children? What noteworthy characteristics did they have?

Illustration - A town called Sardis (in modern day Asia Minor) was captured by the Persian king Cyrus in a most memorable way. From her position, Sardis considered herself impregnable. And well she might! Behind her rose Mt. Tmolus. From that mountain a narrow ridge extended like a pier, and on that ridge the citadel of Sardis was built. It was a position which seemed to defy assault. Cyrus was impatient to take Sardis, since it was holding back his advance. Hence he sent a special message to his soldiers promising a reward to any man who could find a method of scaling this unscalable cliff. A certain soldier in Cyrus' army, named Hyeroeades, gazed at the cliffs,

seeking to discover a route up the cliffs. He saw a soldier on the battlements and, as he watched, the man accidentally dropped his helmet over the battlements and down the cliff. Hyeroeades saw this soldier mount the battlements, pick his way down the cliffs, recover his helmet, and climb back. Carefully remembering the route he had seen the soldier take, Hyeroeades led a band of picked troops that night up the cliffs. Upon reaching the top, they found the battlements completely unguarded. Sardis never dreamed anyone could find a way up the cliffs. They felt themselves completely safe. So Hyeroeades and his comrades entered in unopposed and Sardis was taken.

And, curiously, the very same thing happened to Sardis two hundred years later! Now, with this background about Sardis' history, the letter of the Lord Jesus to that church takes on new meaning (Revelation 3:1-6, especially the Lord's words in verse 3, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you).

The Writing

Another facet of the historical setting focuses on the writing itself. Concerning this, we want to ask -

-from where was it written? For example, 1 Corinthians 16:8 identifies Paul's location as he wrote that letter. Combining this fact with other references to this place in Paul's history (Acts 19,20) and writings (2 Corinthians 1:8-11; 1 Corinthians 15:32; 16:9) casts considerable light on his probable situation as he wrote.

-when was it written?

-what kind of literature it is? What form does it take? An appreciation of the various forms that literature assumes can be extremely helpful in accurate interpretation. Recognizing a parable is crucial to properly interpreting it. Epistolary form explains some of the (to us) illogical elements in Paul's letters. The book of Deuteronomy is written in the treaty form used in agreements between nations in the middle of the second millennium, B>C> This is helpful in understanding some of its provisions.

-What was the occasion and purpose of the document? The different "books" of Scripture came into existence at different times, but all for a purpose. If we can determine that purpose, we have tremendous help in seeking to understand the author's message. The key to this is an intimate acquaintance with the writing, the kind that comes only from repeated reading (or memorization).

Illustration - It was said of G. Campbell Morgan, a great preacher of the first half of the twentieth century, that he would never preach on a book until he had read it 50 times!

The Chronology

Fitting the contents of a given book of the Bible into its appropriate chronological setting is also important in interpretation. At times, events of world history form the context for the messages of the books of the Bible. It is most important to ascertain the historical situation of the book. This is even more important than determining the precise date of the writing.

Illustration - The minor prophets (the last twelve books of the Old Testament) have messages that are not "minor" at all. But these messages are best understood if they are placed accurately in the chronological sequence of Israel's history. The fact that Habakkuk lived and wrote just prior to the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem heightens his problem and God's answer. The "punch" in Zechariah and Haggai comes when one sees how they fit into the return from Babylon and, especially, the rebuilding of the temple. An era of peace and prosperity furnish a startling backdrop to Amos' message.

The Geography

Bernard Ramm has stated, "To try to interpret the Bible without a basic geographical understanding of the Bible lands is like trying to watch a drama with no scenery." The careful student of Scripture will always want to be able to visualize the geographical setting of Scripture. If a locality is known, then all available data on its history, politics, customs, religions, philosophies, climate, commerce, etc. should be gathered.

Illustration - The town of Philadelphia (in modern day Asia Minor) was located in a volcanic area highly subject to earthquakes. In fact, in 17 A>D>, the entire town was devastated by such tremors. As a result, the citizens of Philadelphia lived an unsettled life. Whenever the tremors came--and they came often--the people fled from the city into the open country, hoping to escape the falling stones and masonry caused by the earthquake. Then, when the earth was quiet again, they would return. In their fear, the people of Philadelphia were always going in and out. They would flee, then return, only to flee again., This frightened rhythm had become part of the lives of all who lived in that town. This geographical information enriches our understanding of the Lord Jesus' promise to this church (Revelation 3:12) that they will not go out...any more.

Of course a great way to get a real "feel" for the geography of biblical lands is to visit them! Those who have done so testify that they read their Bibles with new insight and understanding.

The Culture

Culture may be defined as "the total ways, methods, manners, tools, customs, buildings, institutions, and so forth, by means of which, and through which, a clan, tribe, or a nation carry on their existence" (Bernard Ramm). In other words, culture is the way of life of a people, the elements that make up their everyday existence and experience.

Since the Bible is divine revelation, its truth is above culture, that is, its truth is applicable in any and every earthly culture. However, this divine revelation came through, and was addressed to, people who existed in earthly culture. Thus, a specific command or principle may relate to a cultural factor present at a certain time in history. But that truth is not to be discarded because the same cultural situation does not exist for us. God's principles do not change, though the application of His truth may well vary from culture to culture and from one age to another. And so, a knowledge of culture assists accurate interpretation. Cultural awareness does not permit the interpreter to excise unpalatable principles from God's Word, but rather to see how God's truth was expressed in a specific cultural setting.

Illustration - Proverbs 25:21,22, is quoted in Romans 12:20. Paul writes that if we give food and drink to our enemy, we will be heaping burning coals upon his head. In Bible Lands, almost everything was carried on the head--water jars, baskets of fruit, vegetables, fish, or any other article. In many homes the only fire was that kept in a brazier which was used for simple cooking as well as for warmth. The fire was always kept burning. If it should go out, a member of the family had to take the brazier to the neighbor's house to "borrow some fire." Then the brazier would be lifted onto the head and the homeward journey would begin. If the neighbor was generous, the brazier would be heaped full of coals. Thus, to feed an enemy and to give him drink was like heaping the empty brazier with live coals, so necessary for food and warmth, and was the symbol of the finest generosity.

SUMMING UP

These last three sections have sketched out three basic principles for interpreting the Scriptures accurately:

Examine word meanings and relationships

Observe the Context

Determine the historical setting

These principles are always valid, although for certain interpretive tasks they may need further refinement (in understanding parables or typology, for example). But these principles are the basic formulation of the universal laws of human language, the rules by which language means and speaks. A disciple who longs to handle God's Word accurately (2 Timothy 2:15) can only do so as he or she employs sound hermeneutical principles in studying the Scriptures.