

READING THE BIBLE YOURSELF

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INTRODUCTION

Most of us tend to rely heavily on Bible commentaries, church leaders, friends and even hymns and Christian songs to help us determine what we should believe. While all of these may play a part, it is important that we know what we believe – and the scriptural basis for these beliefs. After all, we can only know about the things of God by what God has chosen to tell us in His written word.

If we should still be relying entirely on others for our information, we are relying on them to have gathered their information from the Bible also – and this isn't always the case!

Therefore, if it is agreed that we are personally responsible for constructing our own set of beliefs, then surely, everything we believe must be measured up against what the Bible has to say. You are encouraged to look up the Bible references quoted in this study, and compare these with any verses already familiar to you.

This study is designed to help you:

- understand what is being spoken of in a passage of Scripture
- compare what you read in the Bible with what you hear someone else say
- conduct your own study of Biblical topics.

Please have your Bible with you as you read this study. All Bible quotations included are from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

Three important Scriptures for the Bible student:

2 Timothy 3:16-17 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

2 Timothy 2:15 "Do your best to present yourself to God as one [who is] approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."

Acts 17:11 "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

PART 1 - CONTEXT

It is quite likely that 90% of the problems that face us when attempting to understand the Bible occur because we have not accurately considered the context of a particular passage. In other words, it is unwise for us to single out verses of Scripture and draw conclusions based upon them if we have not considered the following:

What? Word for word, what has been written in the verse?

Before What has been written before this verse?

After What comes after this verse?

Who? To whom is the verse addressed? Or Who is referred to in the verse?

When? When in Bible history does the verse appear?

Why? Why does the verse appear in Scripture?

Have your Bible handy as we expand a little on these points.

WHAT?

To illustrate a point, answer the following question without looking up the references given. Then compare your answer with that given in Scripture:

How many wise men (or Magi) visited the baby Jesus in the stable?

The answer will be provided in a moment. Firstly open up your Bible to Matthew 2. Verse 11 tells us that Jesus was visited by the wise men in a house – not the stable! Verse 11 also tells us that they saw the “child”, not “baby”. The “newborn infant” was likely to be almost two years old by this time (see verse 16). Now read verses 1 & 7 for the answer to the above question. You will note that we are not, in fact, told how many wise men visited our Lord as a child.

This may be considered an unimportant example, but we can see how easy it is to build up a set of beliefs which don't agree with Scripture, when we don't compare these beliefs with the Bible itself. No doubt we will continue to receive Christmas cards with three wise men visiting the baby Jesus in a stable – and all because someone misread Scripture once and no-one else double checked to see what the Scriptures actually said, word for word.

BEFORE

Open your Bible to Luke 19:12-27 – the parable of the Ten Minas. It is not our place at this time to study this parable in depth; however, two points should be noted:

***“While they were listening to this he went on to tell them a parable
(Luke 19: 11a)***

It is obvious that this parable is linked with what the Lord had just said. Therefore, the passage that appears before this parable should be looked at in order to give us a better insight to the meaning of the parable itself.

“...he went on to tell them a parable because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once.” (Luke 19: 11 b)

Here we have the very reason for the parable being told. If we simply look at the parable itself, and ignore what is written before it, we will most likely miss the point.

AFTER

Looking at another parable we find that some important information appears after the passage concerned. Look up Matthew 21:33-44, the parable of the tenants. Again, it is not our intent to closely examine this portion of Scripture; however, look at what verse 45 has to say regarding this parable.

“When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them.”

This informs us that the parable is not merely about “good and bad people”, but that it concerned the chief priests and Pharisees; yet we are only shown this in the text which appears after the passage in question. Once again, if we looked only at the parable itself we would probably miss its message.

WHO?

When we see words like “you” and “they” in the Bible, we should take the time to determine who is being referred to. The book of Isaiah opens with these words:

“The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw...”(Isaiah 1:1)

This tells us that what we read in this prophetic book will mostly concern “Judah and Jerusalem”. We should be careful when looking at such a book not to take the bits out that we might like to apply to us, just because we want them to apply to us. Take, for instance, the following verse:

“those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” (Isaiah 40:31)

These lines are often quoted in order to promote the virtue of “hoping in the Lord”. Whilst we probably all agree that our hope should be placed in the Lord, is it correct to apply these verses to us (believers today)? We know already that Isaiah’s prophecy concerned Judah and Jerusalem (Isaiah 1: 1), and Isaiah 40:27 emphasizes the Jewish context of this particular passage:

“Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel”

Since “Jacob” and “Israel” are definitely not the same as the church of today, it can be seen that not all verses in the Bible are addressed to you and me. Care should be taken not to hastily apply such verses to ourselves. However, it would be wrong of us to completely ignore those Scriptures which are not directly addressed to, or about, the believers of today. We are reminded that:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16)

The Prophets & Levitical laws (along with other writings in the Bible which were originally addressed to Jews) can teach non-Jews much about the Lord’s plans, His dealings with mankind and our responsibilities as Christians today. This is just one demonstration of the principle that all Scripture is given for us, but not all Scripture is about us.

WHAT?

As we have just stated, the Israelites were given the Laws, and they were to keep them. One of the reasons for these laws was to separate them from the other nations.

“If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession”. (Exodus 19:5)

However, when we read the later writings of the New Testament, we see that:

... here there is no Greek or Jew (Colossians 3: 11)

In other words, what applied to the Israelites in previous times no longer applies because of events which have happened since then. More will be said about this later.

WHY?

The Old Testament book of Esther contains no references to “God” or “the Lord”. So why should it be included in a book of writings supposedly about God’s plans for mankind? The reason is that the book of Esther is about the survival of God’s people of that time (the Jews). Their very existence was crucial in order that the plan of God could continue to be carried out. You’ll notice that one of the promises given to Abram in Genesis 12:3 was that:

“... all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

How could this promise be fulfilled if there were none of Abram’s descendants left?

It will help us greatly to determine why a particular verse or chapter has been included in God’s word if we consider its place in God’s overall plan.

Summary of Chapter 1

Many misunderstandings of Scripture and its interpretation will be cleaned up when we take the time to observe:

- what has actually been said
- what was said before the verse
- what was said after the verse
- who was being spoken about
- when the verse was written
- why the verse was written in respect to God’s plan.

The reader is encouraged to look up the Bible references given here as an attempt to answer the following questions using the approach put forward in this chapter. Suggested answers may be found in Appendix 1. However, attempt these questions yourself before consulting the “Answers” section, in order to become familiar with using the methods discussed previously.

Answer the questions “What” “Before”, “After”, “Who”, “When” and “Why” for each of the following verses:

(a) Numbers 15:35, Jeremiah 31:34

PART 2 - APPLYING THE BIBLE TO OURSELVES

We have already seen how the context of a passage (who, why, when, etc.) affects our understanding of Bible passages. We should now consider an aspect of interpretation known as “rightly dividing”, which will help us correctly apply the Scriptures to ourselves.

2 Timothy 2:15 says “Do your best to present yourself to God as one [who is] approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”

The *King James Version* of this verse uses the term “rightly dividing” where the NIV has used “correctly handles”. Regardless of which version of the Bible you read, however, it is always helpful to refer back to the original Greek text for a deeper understanding of Biblical terms – the whole of the New Testament was originally written in Greek.

The Greek text gives us only one word from which “rightly dividing” is translated. The word used in this verse is *orthotomounta* and is derived from its root word *orthotomeo* – (*in* the same way that the word “Biblical” is

derived from the word “Bible” – i.e. it is in a different grammatical case or tense but still retains its essential meaning).

This Greek word orthotomeo is constructed from two shorter words:

ortho – meaning “right” or “correct”. (An orthodontist is one who “corrects” teeth);

tomeo – meaning “to cut”. (Scientists named a very small particle ‘the atom’, because they thought it could not be divided or “cut”; an appendectomy is when you have your appendix “cut” out, etc.)

Hence the meaning of the term “rightly dividing” as found in 2 Timothy 2:15 is to “cut correctly”.

Even though “cutting up” the Word of God seems a rather dangerous action to take, it is quite likely that you already do this! Consider the following passage:

“When any of you brings an offering to the Lord, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock. If the offering is a burnt offering ... he is to offer a male without defect.” (Leviticus 1:2-3)

If we believe that all of the writings in the Bible apply directly to us (present-day believers), then we quickly strike difficulties. Take the above verses, for example. Do you bring burnt offerings to the Lord?

Well, if you don’t, you needn’t worry; for we are told specifically to whom the above passage of God’s Word was addressed:

“Speak to the Israelites and say to them ...” (Leviticus 1:2)

We know, therefore, that these laws about offerings do not apply to us because:

“whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law” [i.e. Israelites at that time.] (Romans 3:19)

and that ...

“Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people.” (Hebrews 9:28)

In other words, the commandments and the Law were given to Israel, and it was only after the death of Christ on the cross that the offering of burnt sacrifices became unnecessary.

With this example it can be seen what is really meant by the term “rightly dividing”. It means looking at a verse or passage from the Bible and making decisions about a number of questions:

- 1) *To whom is this verse written?*
- 2) *About whom is this verse written?*
- 3) *Does this verse apply today?*
- 4) *Does this verse apply to me?*

Consider the example once again:

“When any of you brings an offering to the Lord, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock. If the offering is a burnt offering ... he is to offer a male without defect.” (Leviticus 1:2-3)

1: To whom is this verse written?

Answer: Israelites – Leviticus 1:2.

Question 2: About whom is this verse written?

Answer: Israelites – Leviticus 1:2.

Question 3: Does this verse apply today?

Answer: No, because Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people. (Hebrews 9:28)

Question 4: Does this verse apply to me?

Answer: No, because Christians have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:10)

Again, it will help us to remember that:

All Scripture is given for us

but

not all Scripture is about us

Rightly dividing shows us that God deals with different people in different ways at different times. There are no contradictions in the Bible. However, different instructions are given to different people at different times, as we have seen with the example of burnt offerings stated previously.

When two different groups of people (such as the Israelites under the Law and the church of today) are living under different conditions as set by God, we say that they are living under different *dispensations*.

The differences between one dispensation and another may be compared to the changes that take place as the result of an election.

After a new political party is voted into office, they will often change some of the conditions under which people live. New laws may be introduced in the areas of health care and education, for example. However, many of the conditions will not change. Cars will still drive on the same side of the road as before, and stealing will continue to be against the law. The dispensational approach to the Bible may be viewed in a similar way.

When we compare the different dispensations in the Bible with each other we will notice some similarities and some differences. In all dispensations, we'll see that:

God always loves man

Mankind always falls short of God's standards

God always offers mankind a way of meeting His standards.

However we'll also find that in some dispensations:

Jews and non-Jews may be treated differently in one dispensation, and treated equally in another.

Believers in one dispensation may be required to offer up sacrifices, whilst other dispensations do not require sacrificial offerings.

The performing of miracles and speaking in tongues may play an integral part in one dispensation, and not be as important in another.

It becomes fairly important, then, to understand which portions of Scripture are specifically addressed to believers today. This is the subject of chapter 3.

The reader is encouraged to look up the Bible references given here and attempt to answer the following questions using the approach advocated to this chapter. Suggested answers may be found in Appendix 1

(a) Look up Exodus 20:8 and answer the following question:

- Who is the passage written to
- Who is the passage written about?
- Does this passage apply today?
- Does this passage apply to me?

(b) Look up 1 Peter 2:9 and answer the following questions:

- Who is this passage written to?
- Who is this passage written about?
- Does this passage apply today?
- Does this passage apply to me?

PART 3 - WHICH SCRIPTURES APPLY TO WHICH GROUPS OF PEOPLE?

In the previous chapter on rightly dividing, it was stressed that some parts of the Bible do not directly apply to the church of today, even though all Scriptures contain material from which we may learn. So which portions apply directly to us?

To answer this it is necessary to be familiar with the overall "plot" of the Bible, as this has a great deal to do with answering our question.

An Outline of God's Plan

The first pages of the Bible open with the account of the creation (Genesis 1 & 2). They are soon followed by the story of Adam and Eve's sin (Genesis 3). Here began man's need for regaining a right relationship with God - the underlying theme of Scripture.

Through the ages, God has commissioned messengers to tell others of this need, as well as the way to meet this need through obedience to His words. Noah was one of these messengers. Not many people listened to the message that he had to say, and they suffered the consequences (Genesis 6-9).

The descendants of Noah and his sons displayed an open sign of rebellion against God by building the tower of Babel. As a result, mankind was scattered across the earth (Genesis 11). Out from among the dispersed human race, God chose one man to continue the delivery of His message.

Abram (later to be called "Abraham") was called to father a nation which was intended to be God's messenger to all of the other nations (Genesis 12:1-3). Abram's grandson, Jacob, was renamed "Israel" and his descendants took on this name as the title of their nation.

The families of Israel's sons grew in number and were held captive under Egyptian rule. Soon after their miraculous release from slavery, the nation was given a set of laws (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). In being obedient to the law they were to be different from the other nations. From this point onwards, the only time we read of people who were not Israelites (e.g. Egypt, Assyria, etc.) is when these "outsiders" come in contact with Israelites.

The writings which make up the rest of the Old Testament display Israel's constant struggle between belief and faith in God, and their unbelief and rebellion. It will be remembered that the nation was to be God's "messenger" to the other nations. However, they were not in a position to deliver the message whilst not being faithful to the message themselves.

From the time of the book of Judges onwards, the Lord commissioned prophets (or spokesmen) to remind the Israelites of their role as God's chosen nation. On occasions the prophets were believed, but largely they were ignored. Many of the prophecies told not only of impending punishment for disobeying God's commands, but also of a future time when the whole nation would listen and be obedient. In that time, they would be ruled over

by one known as the "Messiah", or Anointed One. This promised to be a glorious era in Israel's future, and something that they should eagerly await.

However, when the New Testament opens, we find that Israel is being ruled over by the Roman Empire. Most Jews at this time were looking for the promised Messiah to come so that they could be rid of the Romans and live in that promised time of glory as a free nation.

The heart of the majority of the nation's people had changed little, though. Jews who truly had faith in God's word were in the minority, and when God sent His Son - the one who was to be their future king - the nation rejected Him and had Him crucified.

On the cross one of the last things Jesus said was, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Here, He was referring to the nation of Israel and, even after committing such a horrific action, the nation continued to be the focus of God's attention during the period covered by the book of Acts. This period followed Christ's resurrection and ascension into heaven.

If Israel had changed their hearts at this stage, the prophecies promising their glorious future would have been fulfilled there and then:

"Men of Israel ... repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you - even Jesus." (Acts 3:12,19-20)

Sadly, this plea was largely ignored. After some time of continuing unbelief by the majority of Israelites, the message was sent to the home of a Gentile (non-Israelite) called Cornelius (Acts 10). Prior to this, if a Gentile wanted to partake of God's blessings, he had to undergo many rituals and actually become an Israelite (Exodus 12:48 & elsewhere). Here, for the first time, a Gentile was allowed to take part in God's blessings without these ceremonies (Acts 15:1-31).

The intention of this change was to make Israel jealous (Romans 11: 11). What previously belonged only to the Jews was being made available to Gentiles now as well. It should be noted that despite this change in circumstances, the Jew still had the prior position in God's plans: "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew ... much in every way!" (Romans 3:1; see also Romans 1:16; 2:9,10. The book of Romans was written during the Acts period.)

However, the majority of Israelites remained stubborn. As a result of continuing unbelief, the nation ceased to be God's chosen people at the end of the period covered by the book of Acts. This judgment was delivered by Paul to the leaders of the Jews, representatives of Israel's spiritual state (Acts 28:28).

The letters written after the end of the Acts period speak of a new revelation in God's plan for mankind which only came to light after the rejection of the Israelite nation, "the mystery made known to me (Paul) by revelation ... was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed ... This mystery is that, through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together ... members together of one body" (Ephesians 3:3-6).

No longer did Israelites have the prior place in God's plans for mankind, as was the case during the Acts period. Rather believers, whether Gentiles or Jews, now shared equal status.

The letters written after the Acts period speak not of hoping for the Messiah to come, but of a different destiny for believers of this age to look forward to. Promises which, instead of being earthly, are to do with being blessed in heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3 & 2:6; Colossians 3:2). These are the circumstances which directly concern today's body of believers.

What, then, of all the promises to Israel concerning their time of glory on the earth? These will still come to fruition, but at a future time, when all of the blessings which were prophesied long ago will be fulfilled.

Where do the books of the Bible fit into this plan?

Historical

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1&2 Samuel
1&2 Kings
1&2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther

The historical books of the Old Testament describe many events. Some of these include: the creation; man's original sin, the choosing of Abram from among the scattered human race, and the history of his descendents – Israel.

Poetic

Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon

The poetic books of the Old Testament are comprised largely of speeches, songs, or sayings, and were written during the times covered by the historical books.

Prophetic

Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Some of these, however, were written during and after Israel was taken away into exile – covered by the historical books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Historical

Matthew
Mark
Luke
John
Acts

The Historical books of the New Testament cover the life, death, and resurrection of Christ; with the exception of Acts which details the acts of the Apostles after this time.

Acts Period Letters

Romans

1&2 Corinthians
Galatians

These letters were written during the period covered by the book of Acts. They were written to believers who were living during the time that Israel was still dominant in God's plans for mankind.

1&2 Thessalonians

Hebrews

James

1&2 Peter

1,2,3 John

Jude

**Revelation -
prophetic**

See Appendix 3

Post Acts Period Letters

Ephesians

Philippians

Colossians

1&2 Timothy

Titus

Philemon

These letters were written after the period covered by the book of Acts. They were written to believers who were living AFTER Israel ceased to be dominant in God's plans for mankind.

Summary of Chapter 3:

The story-line of the Bible revolves around the nation of Israel, which was intended to be God's messenger to the world. The nation was largely unfaithful in its loyalty to the Lord and consequently ceased to maintain the prior place in God's plans after Acts 28. The believers today are now "God's people", but the unfulfilled promises which concern Israel will still be carried out sometime in the future.

PART 4 - THE RESULTS OF RIGHT DIVISION

It will be noticed that, in the previous chapter, a distinction was made between the letters written during the Acts period and those written after the Acts period. This is because, at the end of Acts, there was a change in dispensation. In other words, God instituted a new set of conditions under which believers would now live.

If we "rightly divide" the Scriptures we will begin to see which parts of the Bible are meant to be read and applied directly to the church of today, and which parts are for our learning and observation only. The way to do this is to compare verses of Scripture and observe the similarities and the differences between each one.

We now aim to illustrate the differences between the conditions in operation during the Acts period, and the conditions in operation for believers today (which began at the close of the Acts period). This will be done by comparing verses from the book of Acts and letters written during the Acts period, with verses from the letters written after the Acts period (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus & Philemon).

This chapter is divided into sections dealing with various topics.

(a) Jews and Gentiles – During Acts

Ever since Abram was called by God in Genesis 12, Gentiles (non-Jews) had not been able to share in God's blessings, unless they became Israelites by way of circumcision – Exodus 12:48. This situation continued throughout the gospels where we find the Lord instructing His disciples not to preach "among the Gentiles", but to "Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 10:5-6).

From Genesis 12, right up until Acts 10, Gentiles weren't even mentioned in Scripture unless they came in contact with Jews! However, in Acts 10 Cornelius (a Gentile) was converted to the faith and was not

required to become an Israelite – not by any ceremonies, nor by any other way. We see here for the first time a Gentile believer being approved by God to share in His blessings.

What then was the reason for this? “Salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious” (Romans 11: 11). In other words, what had once belonged exclusively to Israel was now being given to Gentiles in order to prompt the Jewish nation to be faithful. We see further evidence of this fact throughout the book of Acts. In each case, the apostle Paul preached to the Jewish community first before approaching the Gentiles.

“When they arrived in Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues.” (Acts 13:5)

“At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue.” (Acts 14: 1)

“When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself with a soldier to guard him. Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews.” (Acts 28:16-17)

The book of Romans, written during the Acts period supports the fact that Israel still had the dominant role in God’s plans.

“The gospel ... is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” (Romans 1: 16)

“There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” (Romans 2:9)

“[there will be] glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” (Romans 2: 10)

(b) Jews and Gentiles – After Acts

(Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; 1 & 2 Timothy; Titus; Philemon)
When Israel (on the whole) continued to disbelieve the message of the apostles, they temporarily ceased to maintain the dominant place in God’s plans. This action took place in Acts 28:28. After the Jewish nation had been judged in this way, God revealed a previously hidden part of His plan for mankind. He was revealing a “mystery” (or “secret”), “the mystery made known to me (Paul) by revelation ... was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed ... This mystery is that, through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together ... members together of one body” (Ephesians 3:3-6). “[Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two [groups of people] one.” (Ephesians 2:14)
For further study see Acts 13:15,46; Acts 17:1,2, 10; Ephesians 2:11-22; Colossians 1:26,27.

(b) The destiny or “hope ” of believers – During Acts

In Acts 3:17 Peter told the “men of Israel” that it was through ignorance that they had crucified the Lord. He went on to urge them to:

“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out ... that he may send the Christ” (Acts 3:19, 20).

The Lord would have returned and established the kingdom on earth in those times if Israel, on the whole, had repented from their sin. During that time, Paul and the other apostles taught that Christ might possibly return soon.

“For in just a very little while, ‘He who is coming will come and will not delay.’” (Hebrews 10:37)

“the Lord’s coming is near.” (James 5:8)

“I am coming soon.” (Revelation 22:7,12,20) (See Appendix 3.)

to do this is to compare verses of Scripture and observe the similarities and the differences between each one.

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This chapter is divided into sections dealing with various topics.

(a) Jews and Gentiles – During Acts

Jews and Gentiles – After Acts

(b) Healing and miraculous gifts – During Acts

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When Israel (on the whole) continued to disbelieve the message of the apostles, they temporarily ceased to maintain the dominant place in God's plans. This action took place in Acts 28:28. After the Jewish nation had been judged in this way, God revealed a previously hidden part of His plan for mankind. He was revealing a "mystery" (or "secret"),

"The mystery made known to me (Paul) by revelation ... was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed ... This mystery is that, through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together ... members together of one body" (Ephesians 3:3-6).

"[Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two [groups of people] one." (Ephesians 2:14)
For further study see Acts 13:15,46; Acts 17:1,2, 10; Ephesians 2:11-22; Colossians 1:26,27.

(C) Healing and miraculous gifts – During Acts

Whilst the Lord was on earth, He performed many miracles. These were His "credentials", or signs to show that He had authority from God (Acts 2:22). Likewise the apostles of the Acts period were given these gifts to show the Israelites that their message also had the authority of God (Acts 14:3). One of these miracles was the gift of healing.

"In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, 'Stand up on your feet' At that the man jumped up and began to walk." (Acts 14:8-10)

"God did extraordinary miracles through Paul. Handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them." (Acts 19:11-12)

"[Publius] father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured." (Acts 28:8-9)

Healing and miraculous gifts – after Acts

(Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; 1 & 2 Timothy; Titus; Philemon)

After Jews and Gentiles became as one, such miracles ceased. There are no records of instant healing in Scripture after this time. Instead, there are records of Paul being *unable* to heal:

“Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.” (1 Timothy 5:23)

Had Paul still possessed the gift of healing he would have been able to send an apron or handkerchief to Timothy, as was previously the case.

“I left Trophimus sick in Miletus.” (2 Timothy 4:20)

Previously, Paul had cured “the rest of the sick” on Malta (Acts 28-9).

For further study see Acts 20:9-12; Philippians 2:25-28.

Summary of chapter 4

We have seen the principle of “All Scripture is given for us, but not all Scripture is about us” at work in this chapter. This does not mean that we should pay attention only to the letters written after Acts 28. Neither does it mean that we should ignore verses such as “love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 19:19 *KM* just because they appear in a portion of Scripture written before the end of Acts 28. Rather, by comparing one verse of Scripture with another, we find that verses such as this are very much in harmony with what is written in the epistles after Acts.

As a general rule, if a particular verse written before or during Acts conflicts with one written after the Acts period, then the one written after Acts should be taken as the verse which applies today.

By comparing verses from different parts of the Bible, it is evident that the dispensation in force during the Acts period is different to that which operates today. When we rightly divide the Bible, we will avoid applying the promises and statements made about Israel to ourselves.

Questions

The reader is encouraged to look up the Bible references given here and attempt to answer the following questions using the approach put forward in this chapter. Suggested answers may be found in [Appendix 1](#). However, attempt these questions yourself before consulting the “Answers” section, in order to become familiar with using the methods discussed previously.

(1) Read Numbers 15:32-36. This man was judged for breaking the Sabbath.

(a) Should he have been killed (see Exodus 35:2)?

(b) Why doesn't this contradict Colossians 2:16?

(2) Are the “Ten Commandments” (Exodus 20:1-17) relevant to the believer today? Why/why not?

(3) Compare Matthew 6:14-15 with Ephesians 4:32. Explain this difference.

PART 5 - CONCLUSION

It has been the intention of this study to display the importance of rightly dividing the Scriptures. Together with closely observing the context of a verse (who, what, when, etc.), right division is essential if we are to understand the Bible's message.

In summary, right division is the key to making sense out of the Bible. Problems arise when we take the promises and conditions of other dispensations and try to apply these to ourselves. Let us take to heart the words of Paul:

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles (rightly divides, KJV) the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15)

APPENDIX 1

Suggested answers and explanatory notes

Chapter 1

(a) Numbers 15:35

What: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp.’”

Before: A man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath.

After : The assembly took the man outside and stoned him.

Who: The man concerned was an Israelite. The assembly was the Israelite nation.

When: After the Law had been given. Compare this verse with Exodus 31:12-17.

Why: The Sabbath was to be a sign between God and Israel. The Lord always keeps promises – and sometimes these are promises of punishment for a specified sin.

(b) Jeremiah 31:3

What: “No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord’, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

Before: The Lord is describing details of future times (‘I will make’ ‘after that time’, etc. verse 33).

After: The Lord states that only if the heavens can be measured, etc (verses 36,37) will Israel be rejected by God.

Who: The house of Israel and the house of Judah (see Appendix 4 -Glossary of Terms under ‘Israel’).

When: This verse speaks of future times – prophecies that are yet to be fulfilled.

Why: To further illustrate God’s plans for mankind, and the place that Israel is to have in these plans. Note how the “new covenant” (Jeremiah 31:31) is related to Israel’s future, and does not mention the believers of today.

Chapter 2

(a) Exodus 20:8

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.”

To whom is this passage written? Israelites (Exodus 20:2).

About whom is this passage written?

Israelites (note the constant use of the word “you” whilst speaking to the Israelites).

Does this passage apply today?

No. The strict observation of the Sabbath is not necessary today (see Colossians 2:16-17).

Does this passage apply to me? No (see previous answer).

(b) 1 Peter 2:9

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. “

To whom is this passage written?

God’s elect, strangers in the world (1 Peter 1: 1); i.e., Jewish believers who were not currently living in their homeland.

About whom is this passage written?

While today's believers could be classed as "belonging to God", this verse is referring to Israelites once again.

Look up Exodus 19:6.

Does this passage apply today?

No. It applied for the believers of the Acts period (which was when I Peter was written), but not for today's believers. We are now living under a dispensation in which Jew and Gentile are equal before God (Ephesians 3:6). During the Acts period the Jew had prior place in God's plan. See Chapter 4 of this booklet under "Jews and Gentiles".

Does this passage apply to me?

No (see previous answer).

Chapters 3 & 4

(1) (a) Yes. That was the correct course of action for that dispensation.

(b) Believers under this present dispensation need not worry about being judged concerning the Sabbath because that particular law was given to Israelites while they were still dominant in God's plan (i.e., before the end of the Acts period).

(2) Generally speaking, the Ten Commandments form the basis of our society's laws. However, it must be noted that Scripture makes no distinction between these commandments and the rest of the Law. For example, directly after the Ten Commandments are given, we read of instructions for an altar (for the burning of sacrifices) to be built (Exodus 20:24). We cannot say that we should keep these commandments but ignore the rest of the Law – because these ten commandments were a part of the Law.

While most of the Ten Commandments are instructions we would probably support in this present dispensation, we must observe that there are differences between these commandments and some verses in the epistles written after Acts:

(a) The Sabbath (vs 8-10) no longer needs to be observed. See Colossians 2:16.

(b) Believers today are not destined for any "land" (v 12). See Colossians 3:2; Philippians 3:20.

(3) In these two verses we see two different sets of conditions for two different dispensations. The first (Matthew 6:14) shows that believers at that time were not automatically forgiven for their sins; the second (Ephesians 4:32) emphasizes the fact that believers today have already been forgiven.

APPENDIX 2

Some Useful Books

Below are some books which will be found to be helpful when studying the Bible. As far as is humanly possible, they do not seek to interpret the Bible. Instead they are designed to help the Bible student by providing facts rather than opinions.

Concordance: This book can be used to find all the occurrences of a particular word in the Bible. For example, you could use the concordance to find every occurrence of the word "love".

Encyclopaedia: A Bible encyclopaedia contains information about the people, customs, lifestyle, geography, etc. in the Bible.

Lexicon (or Book of Word Studies): A word study book is a lot like a dictionary – it gives you the meaning of a word. However, this book gives you the meaning of the original Greek or Hebrew words from which our English Bibles were translated.

E-sword.net is our recommendation for free online Bible software that contains all of the above)

APPENDIX 3

The Dating of the Book of Revelation

It is acknowledged that theological scholars of varying persuasions disagree on exactly when the Book of Revelation was written. Although most would suggest a date of around 96 AD, we quote the following to support the case for the book being written during the Acts period, which came to a close in approximately 60 AD.

"Had the Jews repented in accordance with Acts 3:19-26, Christ would have returned, but before that there would have been the great and terrible day of the Lord: the subject of Revelation (1: 10). John also says these things must shortly come to pass (Revelation 1: 1), a phrase very similar to that used in many Acts period epistles, but never seen after Acts 28:28. The Revelation concludes with "Even so, come, Lord Jesus," (22:20 KJV), surely the plea and prayer of the Acts period. (Compare Revelation 1: 1,3 and 22:6,7,10,12,20 with, for example, 1 Peter 4:7; Hebrews 10:25,37; Romans 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; 4:15-17; 1 Corinthians 1:7-8; 7:29-31; 10:11.)

The entire context of Revelation, with its symbolic expressions and allusions, has much in common with the Old Testament prophecies and is very Jewish. Also the number of references to Jews, Jerusalem, etc., in Revelation imply that this book was written before the end of the Acts period for the benefit of the Jewish Christians in the seven churches [see chapters 2 & 3 of Revelation]. The Jewish nation is clearly central to the message of Revelation."

From "Approaching the Bible" (pp. 320,321) by Michael Penny; published by The Open Bible Trust, GB, and Grace Publications Inc., USA, 1992.

APPENDIX 4

Glossary of Terms

ACTS PERIOD:: the time period covered by the book of Acts. This begins with the ascension of Christ and concludes with Paul's announcement of judgment upon Israel. This period does not include the two years mentioned in the closing verses of the book of Acts. Many of the New Testament letters were written during the Acts period and, as such, also contain references which are characteristic of the dispensation which was in force at the time.

CHURCH: a group or assembly of people. Israel is once referred to as "the church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38 KJV).

DISPENSATION: an administration; a set of conditions, or governing laws. When two different groups of people (such as the Israelites under the Law and the church of today) are living under different conditions as set by God, we say that they are living under different dispensations.

GENTILES: (a) anyone who is not a Jew. (b) a term used for "the nations" outside of the nation of Israel. The term "heathen" also means this, as opposed to "an irreligious or depraved person" as it is often used today.

HEBREW: an Israelite; a Jew.

HOPE: the destiny or future blessing of the believers in any given dispensation. The "hope" of a believer is a certainty – not just a possible future happening in the way the word is used today.
(Note from editor:) The hope of the Church which is His body is in heavenly places (Eph.1:3, Col. 3:4) apart from Israel which is the earth.

ISRAEL: (a) a nation descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (b) the name given to the northern ten tribes of the divided kingdom after the reign of Solomon. The southern two tribes were named "Judah". This situation continued until the return from exile detailed in Ezra & Nehemiah.

ISRAELITE: a member of the nation of Israel; a Jew; a Hebrew.

JEW: a Israelite; a Hebrew.

THE LAW: the name given to the commands given to Moses. These are detailed in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Also, sometimes used as a collective term for the first five books of the Old Testament.

LO-AMMI: the nation of Israel are sometimes referred to as being Lo-ammi ("not My people") in this present dispensation as they have ceased to be God's chosen people until He takes them up again in the future. See Hosea 1:9.

MYSTERY: literally, a "secret". The mystery, or secret, in Ephesians 3 which was revealed to Paul was that all believers (Jew or Gentile) were now heirs together (i.e. of equal standing). This is in contrast to the Acts period when Israel still had prior place over the Gentiles in God's plan.

MYSTERY EPISTLES OR POST ACTS EPISTLES: the letters written after the Acts period – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon.

RIGHTLY DIVIDING: taking a section of Scripture which is addressed to us and applying this to ourselves. This also means not applying Scripture to ourselves if it is not addressed to us.