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## HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE

### Step #6 - Interpretation (cont'd)

#### *Genres/Types of Literature*

The *Gospels* are history and biography (the life and ministry of Jesus) blended for an evangelistic purpose (John 20:30,31). Of the many things to keep in mind when reading the Gospels, be sure to distinguish divine teaching (God's message) from historical precedents (events that occurred once and were recorded). Jesus healed blindness in several different ways, but none of them were a standard for how it must happen every time (imagine the argument that could have arisen between the guy healed with mud versus the one healed with just spit on the "correct" way to healed blindness). Also, remember that historic precedents are not *promises* that such things will ever happen again – they are just records of what did occur in that time and place!

*Acts* is a history of the movement of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, focusing on the work of Peter and then Paul. It shows us more about the work of the Holy Spirit as He confirmed the Apostles' ministries, as well as showing us the Apostles carrying out the Great Commission. Similar to the Gospels, events occur (such as miracles or specific works of the Holy Spirit) that may never be repeated, but did occur once for a particular purpose and were recorded to demonstrate God's support of the Apostles' ministries (Mark 16:20; Acts 14:3; Hebrews 2:3,4).

The *NT letters* provide us with doctrinal explanations, exhortations, and encouragements written to various congregations and individuals around the first century A. D. Mediterranean world. As long as we remember that we are reading someone else's mail, there are still a great number of lessons and helpful explanations of New Covenant theology contained in the letters/epistles for believers throughout the Church Age.

The book of *Revelation* is a fitting capstone to the whole Bible, showing the worldly struggle, God's final victory, and the restoration of what He intended in the new heaven and earth. It contains elements of apocalyptic literature (1:1), prophetic material (1:3), and letters/epistles (2-3).

#### *Outside Study Resources*

*Primary Resource Tools* (tools for studying the Bible directly) – For those who want to get all the way into the original language texts (Hebrew, LXX & Greek NT), you can purchase these texts, along with lexicons (dictionaries), concordances, grammars, and parsing aids. With a little work, you can learn to do some pretty good word studies and find out where Hebrew or Greek words are used just by means of exhaustive concordances for the English Bible – just be sure that

the concordance you purchase is based on the same translation as you are using (KJV/ RSV/ NAS/ NIV, etc.). Topical Bibles collect verses that relate to the various topics. Many churches would benefit if ministers would/could take the time to teach interested people to use these tools.

**Secondary Resources** (materials written about the Bible) can help students to understand the crucial background issues that will explain a text - Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias can provide historical and cultural information as to what was happening or being done in human society at the time. Commentaries contain scholarly explanations of the backgrounds for individual books of the Bible, as well as verse-by-verse explanations of what is being said.

While commentaries can be of great help in explaining difficult passages, I offer one word of caution here. Because commentaries are written by educated, but uninspired men that may or may not have their own individual (or denominational) theological axes to grind, examine a number of commentaries on any particular passage to be sure you are getting the general consensus of scholarship and not one person's questionable and imaginative version from "left field." Also, by examining a number of commentaries, you can sometimes find a high quality piece of information that only one writer mentions or a really good way of expressing the meaning.

## ***Context***

Always read "in context!" "Context" refers to the larger setting in which any portion of written material is found. To understand what is being said, you need to read it in its larger ***literary context***. The meaning of a word is clarified by the sentence in which it is found. The meaning of a sentence is clarified by the paragraph of which it is a part. Paragraphs are clarified by the rest of the chapter or book in which they are found. Individual books are clarified by the rest of the writings with which they are associated, especially when we consider the Bible.

Along with literary context, there is also a ***historical and cultural "context"*** in which literature is better understood. To understand any portion of Scripture, it is very helpful to know about the surrounding culture and general flow of historical events at the time the literature was written. Sometimes the writers of Bible books anticipated that later generations would need some help and made comments to aid their readers in this - Moses was explaining earlier Egyptian culture (Genesis 43:32), Matthew provided some background on the theology of the Sadducees (Matthew 22:23), and Mark was helping his readers in Rome to understand Palestinian Jewish culture (Mark 7:3,4,19). American readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century A.D. will also need some background help to bridge the cultural and historical distance to Biblical material. What is the big deal about "mandrakes" in Genesis 30:1-16? Why should a woman have a covering on her head "because of the angels" (1Corinthians 11:10) and why were some in Corinth being "baptized for the dead" (1Corinthians 15:29)? Such issues can sometimes be explained with some background information, but in a few cases nobody today knows exactly what was going on. However, once most of these cultural and historical questions are answered with background material, it becomes obvious that people are remarkably similar from century to century (Ecclesiastes 1:9-11).