

Understanding the Bible 101

An introductory overview of the issues to be aware of and the foundational approaches needed

If you are a student of the Bible, how do you ascertain that you are reading the Bible 'right' and that your interpretations and conclusions are biblically sound.

I believe that there are many intelligent students of the Bible who are most likely using sound logic and reasoning to arrive at their conclusions, and yet ending up with vastly different conclusions to others. For example, many argue that the Apostle Paul was anti-Torah (called 'anti-nomianism' from the Greek word '*nomos*' meaning 'law'), while others argue he was a Torah observant Jew and yet others, that he could not have even been Jewish! I have also addressed this intriguing question in 'The Apostle Paul: Disciple or Fraud' and in 'The Mystery of Romans'.

Assuming the proponents of these three positions have used reasonably sound logic and reasoning (as they are all no doubt intelligent and knowledgeable people), it would appear that they could only come to such radically different understandings based primarily on different premises, factual understandings and interpretative approaches.

Clearly sound reasoning alone does not guarantee valid and biblical conclusions, if the premises that are used to start the reasoning are incorrect. While it is possible to start with the wrong premises and inferences, and even some inaccurate factual information, and then still arrive at the truth, it is a lot less likely.

My experience as well, is that many are not at all aware that they have begun with false premises, false foundations, poor factual grounding and inappropriate interpretative approaches.

For example, many Christians have been indoctrinated to believe that the Law was done away with by Yeshua, and that the church has replaced Israel and is now the 'Israel of God'.

Even those who believe these doctrines would surely argue that to deduce them requires not assuming them to be true before even beginning.

Strictly speaking we should also visit the evidence that God exists and that the Creator of the Universe is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (see my article Does God Exist for more on this).

We should also visit the latest evidence on the question of the resurrection of Yeshua/Jesus (see my recent article '*The Resurrection and Jewish Skepticism*').

Many also seem to start with the assumption that the NT is a valid place to start without being aware that it is a flawed document with a significant number of mistranslations and interpolations, evident to varying degrees, in every single modern version, and even old (eg KJV - 1611) versions (here I would recommend my article on the Greek NT and the Septuagint).

Many of these errors and interpolations are well-documented, even by traditional mainstream scholars such as FF Bruce, but further identified and elucidated by others like Bart Ehrman.

We also have the problem of 'literal' translations vs 'conceptual' translations. For example, in the text of Ephesians 1:18, one Greek manuscript reads, "the eyes of your heart being enlightened", whereas a different Greek manuscript reads, "the eyes of your understanding being enlightened".

Which is correct or are both correct? Without an awareness of such aspects to interpretation and translation, mistakes are more than likely.

Even more significant, than these mis-translations and interpolations, is the use of a Hellenistic or Greek lens to view the text of the NT, and then the Tanakh (OT) through the NT.

This is very evident in the failure to acknowledge the Hebraic principle of agency, seen in for example the apparent contradiction between Mt. 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10. This failure presents itself in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity for example.

As well, or perhaps, as a consequence of these failings, many also then:

1. start with a single NT scripture,
2. assume it is 100% inspired and accurate,
3. fail to take in into the immediate context of it's setting;
4. fail to account for its more general context in its NT Gospel or epistle, and
5. then further fail to place the epistle for example, in its broader historical and Hebraic and Torah/Tanakh context.

I think the following extract from a post by 'Tony' in a Facebook discussion on Universalism is a good case in point. Tony has made a clearly sincere and thoughtful effort to address a couple of the questions raised, as well as reaching some conclusions which appear reasonable.

However, consider where he starts:

"Everyone that is born of Adam rejects Christ: "There is none that understandeth, there is none that SEEKETH after God." Rom. 3:11"

Tony makes a doctrinal assertion based (at least partly) on Rom 3:11 as he quotes it. Tony appears not to have considered a number of very important questions.

Is this scripture a correct translation for the Apostle Paul's inspired words (assuming Paul was inspired)?

What is the immediate context of this verse?

What is the context of the letter to the Romans into which this is placed and how does Romans fit within the revelation of God through the Tanakh and the historicity of the life and resurrection of Yeshua?

Let's look at the question of authenticity for example:

The whole section of Romans 3:10-18 is one of the most problematic portions of Paul's letters as it appears to be quoting a portion of the Tanakh, but in reality it isn't. I address this section in some depth in my article on the Septuagint (LXX) (<http://www.charismacomputers.com.au/The%20Greek%20NT%20and%20the%20LXX%20dec11.pdf>), but will just touch on it just a little here.

Consider the cry of King David (Ps 27:8) *'When You said, "Seek My face", my heart said to You, "Your face, LORD, I will seek."*, and (Ps 40:16) *'Let all those who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; let such as love Your salvation say continually, "The Lord be magnified!"*.

Clearly King David was one who did seek after God.

Also Isaiah writes, *'With my soul I have desired You in the night, yes, by my spirit within me I will seek You early...'* Isa 26:9 and *'Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the Lord...'* Isa. 51:1.

Clearly Isaiah also did and states here that many others did too.

Note also that Romans 3:12 states that there is not a single person who does good as well, and yet in 2 Kings 22:2 we read: *'And he (Josiah) did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the ways of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.'*

Consider also all those of faith mentioned on Hebrews 11; the parents of John the Baptist, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Anna the prophetess, Simon, the disciples and all their converts.

Clearly, this reference if truly from the Tanakh (possibly from Ps 14?), and actually written by the Apostle Paul, must only refer to Gentiles, to unbelievers, not to the righteous men and women of faith. Yet, when we read this reference in its context in Romans 3, especially the context of the verses immediately following, we get a very different picture.

We get an argument that appears to argue against these men and women of faith and against the power of Torah to bring repentance, righteousness and hence salvation.

Thus I, and a number of other bible scholars like Frank Selch who have studied this passage, find it very problematic, and that is clearly a mis-translation or interpolation.

So to argue that “*Everyone that is born of Adam rejects Christ*” based on this scripture is most questionable. This statement and the following universal application based on Romans 5:18 also illustrate both a contextual error and a failure to recognize the use of a Hebraism.

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul was primarily addressing believing Gentiles living within Jewish communities in Rome.

See <http://www.charismacomputers.com.au/The%20Mystery%20of%20Romans%20a%20torah%20and%20shema%20centric%20view.pdf> for a little background on this.

Some hint of this may be seen in Romans 5:15 where Paul speaks of ‘many’ and in developing his conclusion in 5:18, he speaks of a select group in v 17 that his conclusion in v18 applies to.

More importantly though the general Hebraic use of hyperbole is evident in many statements that seem to argue for ‘ALL’ when in fact they are really arguing for ‘many’ or ‘most’. For example, Malachi states that God loved Jacob, but hated Esau (Mal 1:2-3), yet we know that the Almighty loved Esau enough to bless him with the fathering of a nation.

While our Western/Greek and scientific based approach likes the use of explicit and exact terminology, so that ‘all’ or ‘every’ means 100%, the use of exaggeration/hyperbole was very common both in Hebrew and even in ancient Greece. When we read Yeshua stating that “ ...if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell (Mark7:47), we hopefully recognize the use of hyperbole.

It seems to me that most who argue for Universal Reconciliation (UR) fail to note this common and extensive use of hyperbole.

I have only just touched on this issue here, an issue I have raised before – see my article on Universalism and some blog posts such as the one here - http://luke443.blogspot.com.au/2011_02_01_archive.html

So far though, I have really only critiqued approaches I see as unhelpful.

Can I suggest a positive alternative and biblical approach?

I believe I can. I think that the answer begins with the TanaKh or Hebrew Scriptures (falsely called the Old Testament by Christianity). The Tanakh, and among those things at its core; the 10 Words (Ten Commandments), is the lowest common denominator for both Judaism and Christianity, and the most fundamental and foundational revelation of God to the world.

Of course, the revelation of nature (see the argument for Intelligent Design), and the revelation of the resurrection of Yeshua, need to be added to this foundation, but I believe that these additions when properly understood result in a much more holistic and balanced worldview than most could possibly imagine.

I believe some foundational starting points are:

- The Tanakh is an incredibly reliable and virtually unchanged, almost inerrant and untainted book of scripture which was inspired by the Almighty;
- The 10 Words are the moral code of the universe and not just one set or subset of instructions that were intended only for the people of Israel;
- The Talmudic and Midrashic commentaries on the Tanakh while outstanding in great measure, are not without error in places, and thus should be recognised as of secondary importance to the primacy of the Tanakh for the Jewish people;
- Similarly the New Testament, as a document that exposes the Gentile world to the faith of Israel, and which in it’s original form may have been inspired and inerrant, exists today as a flawed and seriously mistranslated and tainted document in places;

- The Septuagint was not the only or primary translation or version of the Tanakh quoted in the New Testament, and in fact, that the Septuagint has been seriously tainted even to the point of redaction (re-editing) so as to agree with NT mis-translations,
- That much, if not most, Christian doctrine today is based on faulty translations and faulty thinking, and therefore, that Gentile followers of Yeshua need to reassess almost all their understanding of a great many issues such as salvation, sacrifice, exclusivity, deity, Law vs Spirit, and Replacement Theology.

So if you were to take this seriously, where would I recommend you start? With what material and commentary could you approach the New Testament in particular and hope to reach helpful and accurate conclusions.

I recommend:

- the writings of David Flusser, and
- all those from the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research;
- Jewish theologians like Mark Nanos; Adele Reinhartz; Rabbi Ken Spiro, Rabbi Moshe Reiss, Moshe Avraham Kempinski, Paula Fredriksen, Pamela Eisenbaum, Amy Jill-Levine, and
- Christian authors like Frank Selch, Greg Deuble and Marvin R Wilson;
- As well as article on the Hebraic Mindset such as 'Living Truth – the Hebraic Mindset' at www.circumcisedheart.info

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