

BIBLICAL SURVEY

Introduction

A little over seven years ago at Champion Forest Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, we launched a Sunday School class on “Biblical Literacy” with about 85 people in attendance. Over a three-year span, we worked hard to teach material, Genesis to Revelation, which would give someone a proficiency in knowing, understanding, and applying the basic lessons of Scripture.

As time went on, the lessons morphed in form, both written and oral. The class participants changed also, adding several hundred in attendance by the time the class concluded three years later. We then spent two years studying church history followed by almost two and a half years in the life and theology of Paul.

With that road behind us, we have taken sight on going back through the Bible, cover to cover, much like we did with Biblical Literacy. This time, however, we intend to take a slightly different tact. Before, we were intent on finding the “core material” that would give even a novice familiarity with the Bible. This time, the effort is targeted a bit deeper. Our goal is to present and study together material that would be appropriate for study of a survey-type class on a seminary level.

This does not mean that someone already has to have great knowledge in order to appreciate this study. We hope to present the material in a way where the novice can grow as well as the believer who has spent decades in study. In other words, we hope to have something for everyone.

APPROACH

This study has both similarities and dissimilarities to the first time we worked through the Bible. As last time, we will cover the Old Testament first, followed by the Apocrypha, and concluding with the New Testament. The Old and New Testaments we cover as “Bible” in both Catholic and Protestant churches alike. We also study the Apocrypha asking questions including:

- Why does the Catholic Church include the Apocrypha in Scripture while Protestant churches generally do not?
- What difference does it make?
- Is the Catholic concept of Purgatory taught in the Apocrypha?
- Did the early church accept the Apocrypha? Did the first century Jews? Does the New Testament quote from or reference the Apocrypha?

www.biblical-literacy.com

Another similarity between this survey class and the Biblical Literacy series done earlier will be the order we study the books in Scripture. While we will generally follow the order of most Bibles, sometimes we will reorder the books to study things within their chronological framework. For example, we will integrate the Old Testament histories from the books of Kings and Chronicles. We will similarly attempt to cover the New Testament epistles within the Acts narrative when they were likely composed. As we do so, this will naturally bring certain important questions to the forefront, like where Scripture seems to say one thing in the Samuel/Kings account, and yet another in Chronicles. We will see this in 2 Samuel 24:1 where we read,

Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them saying, “Go, number Israel and Judah.”

While in 1 Chronicles 21:1, we read,

Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.

We will address what caused David to number Israel, Satan, or the anger of the Lord? We will try to understand the histories behind the two different texts as well.

Also like last our earlier study, we hope to consider and discuss the archaeological finds that have put additional perspective onto the Biblical stories and histories. These will be findings that increase our sense and appreciation of the Bible, as well as those that might have us, at first, scratching our heads in puzzlement.

A good example comes from the archaeological finds at Jericho in comparison to the revelation of Scripture. Jericho was excavated throughout much of the 20th century, with the early excavations prior to World War I by Carl Watzinger. Watzinger concluded Jericho was uninhabited at the time of Joshua’s conquest, invalidating the account of Scripture. Later in the 1930’s, archaeologist John Garstang conducted additional excavations at Jericho. Garstang found evidence of a collapsed city wall (an outer wall previously unexcavated by Watzinger) that fit within the time frame of Scripture’s account of the walls tumbling down. Then in the 1950’s, famous archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon conducted the dig at Jericho. Kenyon concluded that the fallen wall of Garstang was dated much earlier than Joshua, moving back to a position that challenged the Biblical narrative. Then in the 1980’s and 1990’s, further study of Kenyon’s data led some scholars to conclude that the timing of Garstang was in fact correct, in support of Scripture. These sets of data and ping/ponging conclusions are worthy of study.

We will also look at the histories of other nations and compare their accounts of interactions with Israel with the Jewish accounts in Scripture. A good example of this will be the experiences of King Hezekiah and the hostile Assyrians led by

Sennacherib. The spin Sennacherib put in his archives is almost humorous when set next to the information provided in Scripture.

Just this last week, headlines were made about an archaeological find in Israel that some scholars think validate the Scriptural information about life in Israel during the time of Solomon. Recent reports of pottery shards might have the earliest known fragments of Hebrew writing. Also within the last few years, there has been considerable debate over whether a discovered ossuary (a box used by first century Jews for storing burial bones) might have the bones of James the brother of Jesus. These types of news stories need to be considered for the light they shed on Biblical studies. Even more so, however, it is important to see what light Biblical studies might shed on these stories!

During this study, we hope to assimilate certain aspects of science and scientific thought. This will allow us to see where the Bible speaks to science and where science speaks to, or at least helps, illuminate Scripture. For example, we will consider the Creation account in Scripture and compare it to the ideas of evolution. We will discuss whether there must be a chasm between the part of our brain that understands science and the part that accepts God in faith, or whether those two areas can and should properly coexist.

In this regard, we will ask whether the creation material in Genesis is fully literal and useful for scientific reasoning? We will ask similar questions as we read through poetic passages. For example, how should we understand the Psalms that reference the earth as built on waters and the sun moving (rather than the earth)?

Unlike our last series, our intention this time is to offer some outside opportunities for enhanced learning, a section of each lesson called, “Digging Deeper.” There will be supplemental materials available for reading as well as some Internet learning groups that can work through certain study questions in greater depth. This will be made possible, in part, by the written lessons. The written lessons will go into more depth, and cover more material than the oral presentations in class. As before, both written and oral (mp3 and video) presentations will be available on the Internet at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

Another change from last time is the English version of the Bible we will use. Last time, we used the New International Version (“NIV”); this year we are using the English Standard Version (“ESV”). We note special thanks to Crossway Publishers for providing these Bibles to our class at a massive discount!

The ESV is an “essentially literal” translation that seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and the

personal style of each Bible writer. As such, its emphasis is on “word-for-word” correspondence.¹

This ESV “word-for-word” approach differs from the NIV. The NIV used a “thought-for-thought” approach, striving “for more than a word-for-word translation.”² (We should note that both approaches have value and both have drawbacks. At times we will use alternate translations to best understand options in translating the passages.)

As we go along, we intend to keep a working syllabus to give people an idea of what classes are coming up. This should help with any who wish to prepare for class. It also gives people a window of reasonable expectation in case they wish to bring visitors (which is ALWAYS encouraged!)

WE DO ISSUE A WARNING: There will be materials presented that challenge people to address some hard questions that many times we choose to ignore! If you do not want to address these, then feel free to avoid certain classes. That said, we do hope you will come with your questions and see what answers God can provide through diligent study. There is something reassuring about knowing that we have a God who has produced revelation of himself in history and through Scripture in ways where we can study in confidence under the oversight of his Holy Spirit. No doubt it will be necessary to pay attention perhaps more so sometimes than others. But the rewards of digging deeply are fantastic!

Our goal is simple: to present material with a goal of enriching our knowledge and understanding of God’s word, our faith, and God himself. This should also increase our ability to speak on matters of the Bible, and see the role of Scripture in our lives.

EARLY SYLLABUS

Our plans for these first few classes are set out below. We should note that these plans are a bit ambitious and time will tell whether each class is completed in one or two (or three!) Sundays.

Lesson 1 - Introduction

This class is the introduction of this current lesson. The purpose of this lesson is to set out reasonable expectations of coming lessons. We hope we are doing so in ways that entice your further attendance and study!

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¹ See Preface to the English Standard Version, Crossway Publishers.

² See Preface to the New International Version, Zondervan Publishing House.

Lesson 2 – Genesis: Authorship Issues

We will consider the history of scholarship on authorship issues of Genesis and to some degree, the Pentateuch. We will walk through issues of Mosaic authorship, including the insight of historical research into writing in general, and Hebrew specifically. We will consider the dating of the type of Hebrew we read in the Pentateuch and its relationship to a language called “Northwest Semitic.” The “documentary hypothesis” will be explained along with the issues that have challenged it in the last few decades. We will consider the interplay of oral and written histories and prophetic integration of the two.

We will discuss inspiration, inerrancy, and the nature of truth. The structure of Genesis in particular will be set out, vis-à-vis the internal structure of “generations” (*toledot*). Our focus will then zoom in on the creation materials in Genesis 1-3, asking whether they record one creation account or two, and what interaction is there between the chapters. We will compare the genesis creation information in comparison to other Near Eastern creation stories. We will also show the surprising number of matters we consider present in the text, that are actually later theologies built onto Genesis as the ages and revelation progressed.

Lesson 3 – Creation / evolution – the debates and the implications

Here, we discuss the debates and implications of creation and evolution. What is fair and what are the options in understanding Genesis and the interplay with science? What is the current state of theology as it relates to science? What is the current state of science and its relation to theology? Does pre-Abraham material in the Bible constitute history, story, myth, parable, allegory, or some combination?

Lesson 4 – Creation and theology

We discuss the theological lessons and implications of the creation chapters in Genesis. What is the relationship between God and creation? For example, how did God’s instructions on the tree reveal both intimacy and distinction/distance?

In contrast to many contemporary stories of creation that surrounded the early Israelites, Genesis teaches that people are neither gods nor are they accidents. What, then, is the nature and vocation of personages? What are the distinctions between fiat (“Let there be...”) and conscious construction (“Let us make...”) in the Genesis passages? What is the meaning of being made in the “image” and “likeness” of God? How do we see creation, the fall, depravity and the promise (Chaos to orderly cosmos back to chaos)? Are there lessons on the origin and logic of evil, death and sin? Is there significance to the terms used (and those not used) of Satan?

As we approach the next set of lessons, we give just a bare bones sketch of where we plan to go at this time. As we get closer, these classes will get a fuller syllabus outline like those above:

Lesson 5 – Pre-Abrahamic history

This covers the lessons and issues of literality of Cain and Abel, Babel, the Nephilim, and Noah.

Lesson 6 – Abraham

This covers the lessons and stories of his life.

Lesson 7 – Abraham

We plan to spend one week on the Christian prophecies associated with Abraham.

Lesson 8 – The Patriarchs

We intend to cover the stories and lessons of Isaac, Jacob/Esau, and Joseph.

Lesson 9 – Exodus

We will probably use several classes to cover the story, lessons, and archaeology of the Exodus.

Lesson 10 – Exodus through Deuteronomy: the Law

Lesson 11 – Joshua

We plan to take several classes to cover the stories, lessons, and archaeology of the conquest of Canaan.

Lesson 12 – Judges

We plan to take several classes to cover the stories, lessons, and archaeology.

Lesson 15 – Ruth

We plan to take several classes to cover the stories, lessons, and archaeology.

TEACHING PERSPECTIVE

As we approach this class, it is important to set out the perspective of the teaching. As the principle author of the material, I should first note the assistance by a diverse group of readers who regularly provide input for my consideration. These

readers range in the religious spectrum through all major denominations and viewpoints.³

My perspective on Scripture is important to set out as well. I believe that Scripture is the inspired word of God that perfectly conveys his message and is without error in what it claims to be. I do believe that the Bible sets out God's simple truth of redemption for fallen man. That does not mean, however, that the Bible is itself a simple book. It expresses God's revelation in a variety of ways, some simple, others complex. We read poetry, narrative, parable, history, symbolism, and more in its pages. There is a depth and beauty in the ways God has revealed truth through Scripture. It is through his Spirit and study that we can gain insight for living as well as teaching others.

A little more discussion is helpful on the views of inspiration. A key to understanding inspiration is seeing the Bible as revelation. It is not man's writings trying to understand God; rather, it is God's communication to teach and guide man in understanding. This is a directional issue. We do not understand the Bible as an original effort by man to explain God. We see it as God's efforts to reveal truth and explain it as he sees fit. While there is evidence of God in creation and the world around us, we believe that without God's clear revelation, humanity would not have the ability to perceive the nature of God and a Biblical worldview.

For example, take the creation information given in Genesis 1 and 2. We can compare the Genesis passages to other creation stories that were prevalent at the time and location assumed for the Genesis accounts. Our comparisons to those (which will come in subsequent lessons) show an incredible difference and an emphasis that is unique to Scripture. While we might debate the level of literalness to ascribe to the Genesis passage, there can really be no debate on the stark differences in Genesis versus some myth like the Mesopotamian *Atrahasis*.⁴

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³ These readers/advisors do not necessarily agree or disagree with all that is in these lessons. They never fail, however, to enhance the quality of the lessons through thoughtful advice, encouragement, and challenging questions. Special thanks to the reader/advisers who include many of our pastoral staff at church (David Fleming, Stephen Trammell, Louis Miori, Wade Liberator, and Scott Riling), ministers, elders and preachers (Charles Mickey, Ken Dye, John Hill, Jeff Schreve, Rob McRay, Ray Wilson, etc.), friends and class members (Dale Hearn, Steve Taylor, Bobby Joseph, Larry Burgess, Richard Vlach, Ken Gerhart, Jennifer Applegate, Martin Nowlin, et al.), musicians, Seminary Professors, Co-workers (Edward Fudge, Mike Holley, Larry Wilson, etc.) and more. Many of these belong in multiple categories (they are all my friends, for example). A large number of names are omitted out of privacy concerns, but these people know who they are! We have in our list those from the church of Christ, the Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, churches and more.

⁴ This Babylonian epic can be found in tablets dating from the 1700 BC era. We will discuss various other creation understandings in the early lessons in this series.

Because we believe that Scripture is God's inspired word, it does not mean that we will fail to examine the propriety of our belief. We will readily consider the opinions of others who have a differing perspective, without fear over the conclusions we reach. We believe that we stand on truth, and as such, a thorough examination is not only welcome, but also important.

We should also emphasize our conviction that while the Bible is God's revelation of his word, Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation as the Word of God. Our worship is the Word (capital "W") not the word. The Bible is not an idol we worship; it is God's word to aid us and point us to the Lord we worship.

CONCLUSION

It is important that we learn to use and understand Scripture with intelligence and wisdom. Many of us sometimes think of Scripture as a memory source book, seeing it as a collection of God's words to memorize and apply to the situations of life. It was as if it were a spiritual pharmacy for whatever might ail you, as long as you know which pill (passage) to take (read and apply).

That is not a bad thing, but it is a view we should grow beyond. Our goal is to get dexterity with Scripture that allows us to use it beyond a memorization phrase book. As Scripture reveals aspects of God's nature and interaction with humanity, we need to read it with the goal of better understanding him. We need to understand it is not simply a spiritual pharmaceutical cure-all. It is a revelation that gives us truth about the eternal Creator and his plans and provisions for his created people.

We seek to move in our understanding of Scripture where we are able to converse with it and find its message in ways beyond simply "Verse Band-Aids" for spiritual cuts. We seek to have the dexterity to apply ideas in Scripture as well as verses, to see Scripture for its testimonies to life as well as its help for problems. We want to appreciate more its depth and cultivate better ways to discuss the Bible with those who do not share a view of its truth.

We are excited to open and unfold many of the splendors of God's words in Scripture. Please take time to join us. Invite those you think might benefit from the class, and let us begin exploring the riches of Scripture together!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Hear the word of the LORD”* (Jer. 44:26).

Over and over in the Old Testament, we read of the “mouth of the LORD” speaking through the prophets. Can you imagine Moses hearing the voice of the LORD speaking from within the burning bush, and deciding not to listen but instead to move on to the day’s chores shepherding the sheep? Of course not! Yet, how strange that we have the words of the very same LORD spoken to us through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, and all too often we pay little to no regard to those Scriptures. Let us commit in this class not only to listening to the word of the LORD, but also to applying ourselves to understand the words of God.

2. *“No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God”* (1 Cor. 2:11).

We have two ideas from this passage of Paul. First, we understand the need for revelation. Absent God’s Spirit divinely giving us insight into God, which is what we have in Scripture, we have no hope of understanding God and his thoughts. Further, we need not only the Spirit at work in revelation, but also in illuminating our understanding of Scripture. Let us pray that God will bring us into better faith and understanding as we devote time and energy to study his words.

3. *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”* (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

We often found this Scripture in our points for home as we studied Paul. It is worth returning to it again as we delve into the Bible cover to cover. We are learning things breathed out by God that will profit us in all aspects of life and death! Amen!

WANT MORE?

Take time this week and read Genesis 1 and 2. Then do some research on the *Enuma Elish* and the *Atrahasis*. Google them. Wikipedia them. Order them from Amazon or Barnes and Noble. Then, journal some ways that those creation stories vary from the message of Genesis 1 and 2. Try not to discuss the scientific differences, but look for the significances in meaning to humanity between these different accounts. Then email your ideas to us at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com