

B. Interpretive Issues

Properly reading any written text – including any biblical text – depends upon wearing the right pair of interpretive glasses; one must recognize the text for what it is, understand the way it speaks and the concerns and interests it is actually addressing. In principle, this is no different from the dynamics involved in verbal communication between two people: If the two parties don't know, understand and properly relate to one another, they cannot help but talk past each other as they impose their own perspective and interests on the conversation. The parties "listen" through their own grid and so come away from the conversation convinced of what they heard and what the other person meant. They may *believe* there has been communication and a "meeting of the minds," but the truth is that each person has really only listened to himself and reinforced his own convictions, whether negatively or positively.

So also a written text "speaks" to the reader, but because it cannot respond to questions or directly clarify itself, the reader must know how to extract that clarification from it. And that utterly depends upon the reader's intimacy with the text: He must be sensitive to the text's own perspective, concerns and manner of speaking; he must consciously, carefully and purposefully seek to let the text tell him what it means and what it is concerned with rather than imposing his own agenda on it. Without such careful sensitivity, the reader will inevitably (if unconsciously) read his own meaning into the text; in most instances, this is exactly what happens.

1. A critical part of knowing and listening to a text is being aware of its *historical context*. This might seem like common sense, but it's typically missed in practice, if not in theory; most Christians interact with the Bible in a non-historical way. It's not that they deny the historical nature of the Scripture or that its individual books have their own historical context, but they ignore this fact in the way they read, interpret and apply a given text.

So *Old Testament* content is often treated as theological, moral and ethical instruction. This is clear from Christian curricula and much Christian preaching and teaching.

- For example, Daniel's night in the lion's den is seen to be historical in that it occurred during the time of Israel's exile, but its "meaning" is that God looks out for His faithful ones and so we must be courageous and trust Him in even dire circumstances. Treated this way, this episode could have occurred at any time and place; in terms of its meaning and application, it is non-historical. Similarly, the first chapter of Daniel is used as biblical "proof" for the "Daniel diet."
- The same dynamic is evident in the way Christians regard the books of Esther and Ruth. Constructed around a female protagonist, many conclude that their "meaning" is God's practical instruction for women and their unique challenges.
- So also Christians recognize that Isaiah lived and prophesied at a certain time in Israel's history, but many effectively treat this as irrelevant to the meaning of his prophecy. So, for example, chapter 40 is often treated as a doctrinal proof-text: a collection of theological propositions which are said to prove God's absolute sovereignty and therefore the truth that people play no part in their own salvation.

This non-historical way of reading and interpreting the biblical text is as common with the *New Testament*, though often not so obvious.

- This is easily demonstrated with Paul's epistles. Though every Christian acknowledges that they were written to individuals and communities of believers living nearly two thousand years ago, when it comes down to actually interacting with these letters, few give any real thought to the original audience and the circumstances and issues which provoked them and which they address. For all practical purposes, Paul's letters are read as if they were written to the individual reading them and his own circumstances, interests and concerns. (These epistles *do* apply to the contemporary Christian reader, but indirectly as a fellow sharer in Christ together with the original audience to whom the letters were written.)
- So also John's apocalypse (the book of Revelation) is commonly divorced from its historical setting and audience. Far from being treated as Jesus' word of encouragement and exhortation to first-century Christians struggling under Roman persecution, it is read as if it were an inspired "newspaper" whose purpose is to identify current world events as they are signs of the "end times" and harbingers of an eagerly anticipated end-of-the-age scenario.

In the specific case of John's gospel, the historical context depends for its details on the time of its composition. Some date it as early as the middle of the first century; others believe that John's account was put into its final scriptural form in the second century after John's death. Probably most scholars date it near the end of the first century when John was nearing the time of his death. (John is traditionally thought to have died in Ephesus around 100 A.D. after being released from his exile on Patmos.)

But regardless of the exact date, John's gospel shares the same general historical context with the other gospel accounts, namely the period immediately following the "Christ event" – the episode of Jesus' incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, enthronement and "return" in His Spirit (cf. John 14:16-20; Matthew 28:18-20). And sharing that context, John also shared the same general burden, which was to testify to the good news of the kingdom which the God of Israel – and of all men – had inaugurated "in these last days" in Jesus of Nazareth who is His only-begotten Son, Israel's long-awaited Messiah and the Savior of the world. John bore this testimony, but as a Jew situated within and conditioned by his own first-century Israelite context: *His witness to Jesus reaches forward into all generations, but he testified of Him in Israelite terms.* The Jesus who is the Savior of the world is the One revealed and promised in Israel's Scriptures – the Scriptures that record the Israelite history and Israel's role in God's purposes.

2. This truth points to a second critical component of biblical interpretation – one which few Christians give any thought to (if they're even aware of it). This is the matter of *salvation-historical context*. As with any biblical text, so with John's gospel: It must be read and interpreted in the light of the salvation history. A text's historical context is important and necessary to its interpretation, but it is insufficient. *The reason is that information is not the same as meaning;* data must be interpreted to be of any value.

Many scholars and commentators devote pages to the matter of when and where John wrote his gospel (as they do with other biblical texts). Making this determination (which, incidentally, can't be made with absolute certainty) isn't irrelevant, but it doesn't resolve any issues of interpretation and meaning. The time and circumstance – the historical setting – of John's writing *is* relevant to its meaning, but only as that setting is itself situated within the larger salvation history. For history isn't an endless chain of discrete and random events and circumstances, but the organic scheme by which God, in Christ, accomplishes His design for His creation. History is the history of *redemption* (where "redemption" refers to God's recovery of the entire created order and its obtainment of its consummate destiny in Jesus Christ; cf. Ephesians 1:13-14, 4:30). Thus history – in its parts as well as the whole – has its meaning in the salvation (redemptive) history.

And so, while the historical context of John's gospel is important, the critical issue is where it is situated on the continuum of the salvation history. It is only with that knowledge that the reader can understand John's perspective and vantage point as he interacted with the past, present and future. And John's gospel – like all of the New Testament writings – is situated in what Paul called the "*fullness of the times*" and the "*completion of the ages*" (1 Corinthians 10:11; Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 1:9-10).

- These expressions highlight the fact that the "Christ event" brought to its climactic completion the former Adamic age of promise and ushered in the new age of fulfillment – the age of the everlasting kingdom of God's new creation in His Son and Servant/Messiah, the new and last Adam.
- Thus the "Christ event" was the great and singular turning point in the salvation history; everything prior to it pointed toward it and anticipated it and everything subsequent to it looks back to it and is determined and defined by it.

John's gospel (as its counterparts) is situated in the new age of the new creation in the Messiah and he recounted Jesus' person, words and works from that vantage point. His design was not to set down in writing some interesting facts about a man he knew named Jesus of Nazareth, but to show, by compiling a purposeful record of Jesus' life, that God has fulfilled in Him all of His promises regarding His cursed creation – promises which He revealed and developed in connection with the Israelite history recounted in the Old Testament scriptures. *Thus John's backward and forward gazes are both entirely christological:* He interprets the past as now fulfilled in Jesus and what lies ahead in the future as the divinely-directed progress of that fulfillment. God has established His kingdom and installed His King in Zion, His sanctuary-throne; now the King is executing His rule toward the goal of universal dominion in which all things are summed up in Himself (cf. Psalm 2 with Acts 2:14-36; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28; Hebrews 2:5-11; cf. also Isaiah 45:11-25 with Philippians 2:5-11 and Zechariah 6:9-15 with 1 Peter 2:4-8).

The salvation-historical context is critically important in reading John's gospel and yet it is often ignored, evident in how rarely this book is interpreted through the lens of the Old Testament scriptures. Most treat it in a vacuum, or, at best, in the light of certain presuppositions derived from a fragmented reading of the New Testament.

The gospel writers all wrote with the goal of demonstrating that God's promises – and so Israel's scriptures – have been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. A key implication of this is that John's gospel must be read within its proper Jewish context. This is not to say that his account was written *for* the Jewish people as such, but that John wrote as a Jew who recognized that Israel's history, being the preparatory salvation history, had reached its climax and fulfillment in the person and work of Israel's Messiah. Thus he framed and structured his account of Jesus in *Israelite* terms – that is, in the language and concepts embedded in Israel's history and scriptures as they set forth Yahweh's purposes and promises to Israel, but also *through* Israel to the world. Indeed, John could not have shown that Jesus is the Messiah and Savior of the world if he had not made his case in Israelite terms. A servant follows his master, and Jesus Himself explained His identity and calling in terms of Israel and its history and purpose as recorded in the Scripture.

3. Another factor to be considered in interpreting John's gospel is its *structure*. John had a conscious design in his writing and it follows that he structured his account in a way that suited that intent. Scholars have proposed many different structural formats, some differing in details and others in substance. But viewed through the lens of John's perspective and purpose (ref. 20:30-31), one can detect, at the least, a *thematic* pattern.
 - a. First he laid the foundation for his account by identifying Jesus broadly in terms of His relationship with Israel's God, the divine purpose behind His coming into the world and the significance and effect it had (1:1-18). John's prologue thus provides a kind of summary overview of his gospel account and, as such, introduces many of its key themes and emphases.
 - b. Next, John identified Jesus as the Isaianic Servant/Messiah by connecting Him with the Baptist, the forerunner appointed to herald Yahweh's coming (1:6-8, 19-34; cf. Isaiah 40:1ff). So John recognized that, when Yahweh came in His Spirit-filled Servant (1:29-34; cf. Isaiah 42:1-7, 61:1-3), He would form a new Israel in Himself by His Spirit (cf. 4:1-14, 21-24, 7:37-39, 14:16-20, 15:26-16:15, 20:21f).
 - c. Jesus' reconstitution of Israel began with the Twelve (ref. 1:35-51, 13:1-17:26, 15:21-17), but looked more broadly to the whole nation. Thus John recorded Jesus' ministration to all Israel which began in Galilee (2:1-12; cf. Isaiah 9:1-7), included Judea (3:22) and Samaria (4:1-42), and had its climactic focal point in Jerusalem, the alleged seat of Yahweh's rule and worship, but really the epicenter of Israel's apostasy (2:13-21, 5:1-47, 7:1-10:39, 11:45-12:19, 18:1-19:37).
 - d. Jesus was going to restore Israel in Himself, but for the sake of the world. Thus, after stressing Jesus' global mission in his prologue (1:9-13), John uniquely recorded the Baptist's identification of Jesus as the Savior of the world (1:29), subsequently reinforcing that truth in His encounter with Nicodemus (3:1-21).
 - e. And woven through all of these themes and binding them together are John's core themes of life and love: *love as the divine power that conveys the divine life* (cf. 1:3-13 with 3:1-16, 35-36, 4:1-14, 5:19-26, 39-40, 6:24ff, 10:1ff, 11:1ff, 17:1ff).