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NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

MAIN COURSE

CRS218
BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

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CONTENTS   PAGES

Module 1   General Introduction

Unit 1:   General Introduction to Hermeneutics
Unit 2:   History of Biblical Hermeneutics
Unit 3:   Historical-Cultural and Contextual Analysis
Unit 4:   Lexical Syntactical Analysis

Module 2   Interpreting the Old Testament

Unit 1:   Interpreting Old Testament Laws
Unit 2:   Interpreting Prophetic Books
Unit 3:   Interpreting Historical Narratives
Unit 4:   Interpreting Wisdom Literature
Unit 5:   Interpreting the Psalms

Module 3   Interpreting the New Testament

Unit 1:   Interpreting the Gospels
Unit 2:   Interpreting the Parables
Unit 3:   Interpreting the Acts of the Apostles
Unit 4:   Interpreting the Epistles
Unit 5:   Interpreting Revelations

Module 1   General Introduction

UNIT 1:   General Introduction to Hermeneutics

Content

1.0   Introduction

To introduce this course in Biblical hermeneutics, it is very pertinent to examine Acts 8:26-31:

> 26But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert *road*.)
>
> 27So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship,
>
> 28and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.
>
> 29Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot."

³⁰Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

₃₁And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

This encounter between Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch is a good passage to begin this book on hermeneutics. This is because there are certain facts relevant to hermeneutics that are very glaring in the passage. In the above passage, the Ethiopian eunuch (who is most certainly a Jew either by birth or by proselytising) was reading a passage of the Scripture which he could not understand. For him to understand the passage, he needed a guide in the person of Philip which points out the need of a teacher in understanding the scriptures.

Examining the qualities of the Ethiopian eunuch, Calvin admits that he was a man who "acknowledges his ignorance freely and frankly". He later compared the eunuch with those "who have become swollen-headed with confidence in their own abilities" in handling the scriptures and concludes that the paucity of those that will humbly submit themselves to teaching as far as the Bible is concerned is the reason why the reading of scripture do not bear fruit with many today.

The high rate of heresy in the church is definitely as a result of the little understanding of the Bible and the inability of many Bible teachers and pastors to humble themselves to learn how to accurately interpret scripture.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this first unit you should be able to:

- Define hermeneutics
- Identify and discuss the factors necessitating hermeneutics
- Identify the tools of hermeneutics
- Discuss the qualities of an Interpreter
- Discuss the relationship between hermeneutics and other fields of biblical studies

3.0   Main Content

3.1   The Meaning of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is derived from a Greek word *hermeneien*. It is a word derived from Hermes, the Greek god known as the messenger of the gods. He is thus saddled with the task of transmitting and interpreting the communications of the gods to their fortunate and/or unfortunate recipients. Thus in classical literature, the verb *hermeneus* is used to mean 'to explain' or 'to translate'. It often appears in contexts which stresses the responsibility of human beings to interpret rightly the ancient writings thought to contain messages from the gods.

The Encarta Premium Dictionary defines hermeneutics as "the science and methodology of interpreting texts, especially the books of the Bible". Thus, hermeneutics is the art and science of the process of interpretation. It is an act of exegesis in the local context. Interpretation in itself is an art that seeks to remove the differences between a particular writer and his readers so that the meaning or the message of the writer may be truly and accurately comprehended by the readers. In most contemporary usage therefore, hermeneutics is synonymous with interpretation.

3.2   Factors Necessitating Hermeneutics

The necessity for interpretation has become a debate today especially between the hyper-Pentecostals and the conservatives. For some Pentecostals, the Holy Spirit should be able to illuminate the eyes of Christians to get the message of the scriptures hence there is no need to follow any principle or rule of interpretation that seeks to debar the Holy Spirit from doing His work.

 It is this controversy that makes it necessary to explain the reason for interpretation:

The Existence of Gaps between Writer and Reader

The definition of hermeneutics as stated above implies that there are certain gaps existing between the writer and the readers that may obscure the message or the meaning of the writer from the reader. The different gaps that we have are as follows:

Historical Gap: this is the separation in time between the author and the readers. For example, the modern reader might not understand the rationale

for Jonah's reluctance to go to Nineveh, however on hearing the history of Assyrian cruelty to the victims of war and the fact that they were overlords over Israel, it will be better understood.

Cultural Gap: this is the difference between the culture of the writer and the readers. This would be dealt with more elaborately later.

Linguistic Gap: this is the gap that exists between the text in its original language and the various translations. The Bible was written originally in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, three languages that are different in structure and idiom from our contemporary languages, be it English and our national languages, there is the need to close the linguistic gap via interpretation.

Philosophical Gap: this is the existence of a different attitude towards life and the universe between the writer and the interpreter of the text. To interpret correctly, there is the need to examine the similarities and differences between the philosophical worldviews.

Diversity of Mind among Humankind

Diversity of mind refers to the issue of mental development. For example, two men of the same culture and nationality may not be able to communicate, if one is learned (consequently, broadminded and liberal) and the other is unlettered. The truth of this is grasped in 2 Peter 3:15-16:

> Just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort.

From the above quotation it is clear that some Pauline doctrines are difficult to understand and that some unlearned people have misinterpreted Paul the author. Given Paul's philosophical background, one can conclude safely that some people who were not highly educated misunderstood and consequently misinterpreted him. Such is the result of diversity of mind among human beings.

Diversity of Culture among Humankind

If the diversity of mind can create gaps in interpretation, the problem that diversity of culture can generate is even greater. This is because language and culture go hand-in-hand. Language and culture are so linked together in such a way that differences in culture can lead to wrong interpretation.

Let us quickly examine a point in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14. The thirteenth verse pictured the tax gatherer as "beating his chest," an action which in verse fourteen was explained as a sign of humility. Among the Yoruba, a major ethnic group in Nigeria, beating one's chest is a sign of pride. If one uses Yoruba culture to interpret the tax gatherer's action, it would definitely be misinterpreted.

The Nature of the Bible

When some people talk or think of the Bible today, they usually have the concept of a 20th century book that was written by one author. They may not realize that the Bible is made up of 66 books written by about 40 people who had different backgrounds and lived at different places over along period of time. It also covers many literary genres from prose to poetry.

Secondly, by its nature, the Bible is the Word of God issued through the pen and the language of human beings. The main issue then is how do we interpret a record of divine revelation in which heavenly thoughts hitherto hidden to human beings has been expressed in the imperfect human speech? So on the whole; no one can do without interpreting the Bible if it is not to remain inaccessible.

The Problem of Language

One salient fact that confronts Bible interpreters today is that most Christians hold versions of the Bible in their hands and not the Bible in its original languages. This has created the first area of language problem which is translation obscurity. There are times when in translation the thought or language expression of the original language is not available in the receptor language hence the main thought would be lost. Let us cite Psalm 23:1 as an example. If a Yoruba person who has no idea of the English version of the Bible is asked to translate "*Oluwa ni Oluso aguntan mi*" to English, the literal translation could be "The Lord is the One who keeps my sheep". However, the thought of the psalmist in this psalm is this: "as a shepherd cares or tends for the sheep so does the Lord care or tend for me".

The second area of the problem is the author's style of expression. One would have to determine how the author has used a particular word. Is the word used symbolically, analogically, metaphorically or literally? This point would be discussed in details in the unit that deals with the role of grammar in interpretation.

The Bible Commands It

Paul wrote to Timothy:

> Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15)

The Greek word, *orthotomounta*, which is translated "handling accurately", actually means "cutting straight" thus in application to the scriptures, would mean "rightly interpreting". The point is that for anyone to be a minister of the gospel that must not be ashamed, that person must struggle hard to interpret God's word accurately.

Good Exegesis is the Basis of Sound Theology

Since all that we know about God and humanity are revealed to us largely through the scriptures, our theology then rests a lot on interpretation. If we interpret wrongly, then the theology that would be derived would be wrong. If our theology is wrong, then, our practical life as Christians would also become faulty since one's action is usually more than often based on one's beliefs. It is important for us to engage in sound biblical interpretation so that we could have sound theology that is Bible-based.

For Good and Sound Sermons

If anyone is engaged in the task of preaching (which to Christian ministers and laymen is becoming the norm rather than the exception) it becomes necessary to interpret the Bible. If one's interpretation is wrong, the sermon based on it, no matter how beautifully packaged and delivered, would not be biblically sound. For example, a television evangelist one day was preaching on John10:10, "the thief comes not but to steal, and to kill and to destroy…" In his interpretation, he took the "not" as functioning as a negative particle which is not the case in John 10:10. So, the thrust of his message was that the thief will not come to your house. A proper interpretation of that passage however is that whenever the thief comes, his aim and goal is to steal, to kill and to destroy. Though the sermon was good to the ears and was fitting in the era when armed robbers prowl the streets, killing and maiming, it was based on a misinterpreted text.

Apologetic Purposes

As the world is growing more and more pluralistic, the exclusive claim of the Christian faith to salvation makes it the subject of attack from the intelligentsia and people of other faiths. Alongside this is the rise of radical higher criticism that seeks to destroy the Christian faith and message. It has now fallen on us to stand up and defend our faith in the face of these crippling criticisms, and the best way to handle this effectively is to learn how to interpret the scriptures correctly.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

What are the factors that make interpretation compulsory?

3.3   Hermeneutics and Other Fields of Biblical Theology

Hermeneutics is related to other fields of biblical studies such as: the study of the canon, textual criticism, historical criticism, exegesis, biblical theology and systematic theology.

Hermeneutics and the Study of the Canon

The word canon has its root in the Greek word *kanon* which means 'a reed' or 'a straight rod' or 'a measuring stick'. It later came to stand for a standard of measure. When used in relation to the Bible, it is meant to distinguish what is revealed and divine from what is not revealed and thus human (Flanagan and Schihl, 2004). Canonicity precedes all other studies in biblical studies, thus it precedes hermeneutics. This is the historical study of the process of the determination of the books of the Bible that bears the stamp of divine inspiration. By and large, hermeneutics is necessary primarily for books that are inspired.

Hermeneutics and Textual Criticism

Logically following after canonicity is textual criticism, also called lower criticism. Textual criticism is the attempt to ascertain the original wording of a text. It is necessary because there are no autographs of any of the books of the Bible and hermeneutics is needed for the ascertained text.

Hermeneutics and Higher Criticism

Higher or historical criticism is one of the most controversial of all fields of study in biblical studies. This is because many of those in the field often

begin with liberal presuppositions thus conservative Christians have often equated higher criticism with liberalism. Higher criticism however has to do with authorship, date of composition, historical circumstances surrounding the writing of the book, the authenticity of the contents and literary unity. It does not have to be equated with liberalism.

Hermeneutics and Exegesis

It is only after this level of study that scholars are actually ready to pursue hermeneutics. Exegesis is the application of the principles of hermeneutics to arrive at a correct understanding of the text. Exegesis takes its meaning from the prefix 'ex' (meaning out of or from) and thus carries the notion that the interpreter is attempting to derive his understanding from the text and not reading his meaning into the text (*eisegesis*) which is the common trend today.

Hermeneutics and Theology

Closely related to exegesis are biblical and systematic theologies. Biblical theology is the study of divine revelation as given through the Old and New Testaments while Systematic Theology organizes the biblical data in a logical manner.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

What is the relationship between hermeneutics and other fields of biblical studies?

3.4   Tools of Hermeneutics

There are certain tools that would be of help as you seek to interpret the scriptures. Some of these include the following:

Good Study Bibles

Study Bibles assist in biblical interpretation because they have marginal notes, references and extra-biblical aids that would help in elucidating one's study. You have to be careful however in using study Bibles because of divergent interpretations by the authors. The interpretations of Study Bibles should be scrutinized and not accepted hook, line and sinker.

Reliable Modern Versions

Modern versions of the Bible are needed because of the attempt to use contemporary language in translation. For example, where King James Version used "Blessed" in the beatitudes, the Good News Bible used "happy" which is a close translation of the Greek word used (*makarios*).

Using different modern Bible versions, would help you see the translation differences between them. This would open your eyes to translation, interpretation and textual problems which are all involved in the process of interpretation.

Bible Dictionaries

There are various types of Bible Dictionaries and they are of help in supplying immense amount of background materials and the meaning of many of the key words that are used in the Bible. All these would help in illuminating the passages of the Bible.

Bible Concordances

A concordance is an index of words arranged in alphabetical order in the Bible. At times, the Concordance may give information about the meaning of a listed word. I would recommend here, exhaustive concordances because apart from helping in tracking down passages of the Bible that one cannot lay hands on easily, exhaustive concordances would also trace the use of certain words in the Greek or Hebrew language thus throwing more light on the meaning of the word.

Bible Commentaries

Bible Commentaries are good because they would help you to discover the various interpretations that a particular passage has been given by scholars and ministers. You need to be careful however in the selection of commentaries because they can be divided into two broad classes. There are the devotional and the exegetical commentaries. You need to balance the use of these two classes of commentaries so that your study of the Bible would not be superficial.

3.5   Qualifications of an Interpreter

While I am not averse to the doctrine of the soul's competency (that is, the teaching that every believer is able to interpret the Bible), in order to be a

good interpreter of the Holy Scriptures, you must possess certain qualities. These qualities are classified into three broad classes, namely: intellectual, educational and spiritual. These shall be examined one after the other.

Spiritual Qualification

The spiritual qualities of an interpreter are the more of gifts from the Lord. They are gifts from the Lord in that they are usually not cultivable or achievable by human beings.

The Interpreter must be Born Again

Anyone who wishes to be a good interpreter of the Bible must be 'Born Again'. In other words, the person must have come into the salvation experience of God as given in Jesus Christ. This point is well summarized by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:14 when he said that the natural man cannot receive the things of the spirit of God. A good interpreter must be able to receive spiritual things from God.

The Desire to know the Truth

The interpreter must possess the disposition to seek and know the truth. While many people today desire to know the truth, they do not desire to seek it; thus they end up taking what other people have said as being the truth. A good interpreter must be able to take the pains that go along with seeking the truth if that person wants to know the truth.

The disposition to seek and know the truth includes the disposition to accept the truth even when that truth speaks against you. There must be no prejudicial influence to overshadow it. Humanly speaking, when people see the truth speaking against them, the tendency is to rationalize it away. A good interpreter must avoid such influences from overshadowing the truth.

Humility

A good interpreter must be humble for it may not be possible for a proud man to receive the counsel of God as: "God resists the proud" (1 Peter 5:5). In the course of interpretation, you must be humble enough to accept your findings even when you see your "pet theology" falling to pieces before your eyes. The common practice in the church today is for people to reject interpretations that are not in line with what their denomination teaches. This tendency is a subtle arm of pride. When you can hear, search and

establish a truth even when it speaks against you or your belief then you must be spiritually humble.

Perseverance

Arriving at true interpretation when you are studying the Bible is not an easy task. It is a task that is fraught with difficulties and at times frustrating boredom. A good interpreter will persevere patiently until all difficulties are surmounted. At times it may take days or weeks or months to decipher a text but the good interpreter must struggle on. A hardworking person is the one that would be a good interpreter and not a lazy person because it involves long hours of hard work.

Prayerful

To study the Bible without praying may be a useless and fruitless exercise. You need to pray for the spirit of discernment as you study the Bible and for the leading of the Spirit because interpretation must be a spiritual exercise for it to be rewarding. Like all spiritual activities, interpreting the Bible calls for prayers.

Fellowship and Communion with the Holy Spirit

Since the writers of the books of the Bible are inspired by the Holy Spirit the interpreter too must necessarily be a partaker of that same spirit. He who would know and explain to others the mystery of the kingdom of heaven must have entered into the blessed communion and fellowship with the Holy One.

Intellectual Qualities

Most of the intellectual qualities are native to the mind but they can be developed or trained.

Quick and Clear Perception

To be a good interpreter you must have the ability to grasp, that is, understand the thought of a writer in its full force. This ability will enable you to catch the full import, that is, the peculiar usage and meaning of words or phrases in the text. You would also be able to follow the drift of writer's argument.

Critical Sharpness

This is the quality that would enable you to discern the connection of thoughts and association of ideas. It would enable the interpreter to see quickly what a passage does not teach and what it does teach. This quality would aid you in the analysis of the text. This age is one in which this quality is needed more than ever because of the infiltration of wrong doctrines. It is also unfortunate that most of the heresies plaguing the church today gained entrance right from the pulpit.

An uncritical mind would only see or read events on the surface. It would not be able to probe the narratives so as to discover issues. Note that today people with critical minds are being condemned for being critical or being theological and not spiritual. People often assume that to be spiritual is to be unquestioning. To get to the gem of biblical message, one must possess critical and questioning mind that would analyse the why and how of narratives and words.

Educational Qualification

It is common in some quarters to say that the disciples did not attend any school yet they were able to interpret the Bible. You have to know that in Jesus' time there was no formal education like ours, so the disciples attended the best school of their time – at the feet of Jesus – where they were schooled for three years. Another example of informal education was that Paul had through the tutelage of Gamaliel.

Unlike the intellectual qualities that are natural and the spiritual qualities that are gifts from God, requisite educational qualities can be acquired through study. These are:

Knowledge of Palestinian Geography

An understanding of the geography of Palestine will definitely throw light on the understanding of certain portions of the scripture. For example a good understanding of the phrase "the dew of Hermon falling upon the mountains of Zion" (Psalm 133) is highly dependent on one's understanding of the geography of Palestine.

Knowledge of History

An understanding of universal history and its effect on Palestine as a whole and Israel in particular is also important for biblical interpretation. For example, you need to know the effects of Hellenism on Judaism which is seen in the New Testament. For an adequate discussion of this issue you will need to know Jewish history from the period of Alexander the Great down to the Caesars of Rome and Herod the Great. The records of many peoples, both ancient and modern are of value in testing the accuracy of biblical writers. A vast amount of the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian inscriptions have shed light on the biblical narratives.

Knowledge of Antiquities

As a good interpreter you should be acquainted with the study of archaeology, habits, customs and arts of the ancient land. You are also to keep yourself in tune with the archaeological discovery of the land. All these will work together to elucidate your understanding of the scriptures and your interpretation by implication.

Good Understanding of the Biblical Languages

Since the scriptures were written originally in other languages, as a good interpreter you need a working knowledge of those languages. These are the Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic languages.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

What are the qualities needed by a good interpreter of the Bible?

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit you have been taught the meaning of hermeneutics from the root word and the Greek god named Hermes. You have also been taught that certain factors make interpretation a necessary enterprise when it comes to the Bible. The relationship between hermeneutics and other fields of biblical studies have been explored and what it takes to be a good interpreter of the Bible. These qualities have been divided into three: intellectual, spiritual and educational.

5.0   Summary

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- Hermeneutics is the science and art of interpretation.
- Gaps like linguistic, historical and cultural gaps makes interpretation mandatory.
- While the study of the canon and the text precedes exegesis (which the application of hermeneutics to the Bible), hermeneutics precedes biblical and systematic theologies.
- Spiritual qualifications of a good interpreter include being born again, the desire to know the truth, humility and prayerfulness.
- Intellectual qualities include quick and clear perception and critical sharpness.
- Educational qualities include a good knowledge of Palestinian geography, history of Palestine, knowledge of antiquities and the biblical languages.

Self-Assessment Exercises

What are the factors that make the interpretation of the Bible mandatory?

6.0   References/Further Readings

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UNIT 2:   History of Hermeneutics

Content

1.0   Introduction
2.0   Intended Learning Objectives
3.0   Main Content
      3.1   Ancient Jewish Hermeneutics
      3.2   Patristic Hermeneutics
      3.3   Mediaeval Hermeneutics
      3.4   Reformation Hermeneutics
      3.5   Post-Reformation Hermeneutics
      3.6   Modern Hermeneutics
4.0   Conclusion
5.0   Summary
6.0   References/Further Readings

1.0   Introduction

Having gone through the preliminaries of hermeneutics, the next area to examine is the history of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics have a robust and interesting history that will not only enrich your study but also give you an insight to the methods of interpretation still used today. In this unit you will study the history of hermeneutics from the ancient Jewish days to the modern period of interpretation.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Describe each period in the history of hermeneutics
- Identify major hermeneutists in each period
- Comment on the role of each hermeneutists on the formation of the rules and principles of hermeneutics
- Identify the method of hermeneutics prevalent in each period

3.0   Main Content

3.1   Ancient Jewish Hermeneutics

The most rational point to begin the history of hermeneutics is with the ancient Jewish exegetes. This is because the Jews are the primary recipients of these revelations and they too have grappled with the idea of understanding the message of God for their society as we are doing today.

Though most adherents of Redaction Criticism hold that the interpretation of scripture begins a little before the time of Ezra, citing Nehemiah 8:8, one can say that the science and art of biblical interpretation began with Ezra and the other scribes as they sought to help the Jews who had lost their understanding of Hebrew during the exile to translate the Hebrew text to Aramaic including explanations to make the scripture clear.

Scribes following after Ezra hold that every letter of the text is inspired thus leading to an era of multiple meaning of a given text. For example, Rabbi Akiba of the 1st Century AD holds that every repetition, figure of speech, parallelism, synonym, word, letter and even shapes of the letters had hidden meanings. This eventually led to fantastic speculations. By Jesus' time, Jewish exegesis could be classified into four main categories: literal, midrashic, *pesher* and allegorical.

Literal Interpretation

The literal method is also called the *peshat*. It served as the basis for the other types and was not recorded as it was assumed that everyone knows it and it is undisputed.

Midrashic Interpretation

The basic rules of midrashic interpretation were developed by Rabbi Hillel. It emphasized comparison of ideas, words or phrases found in more than one text, the relationship of general principles to particular instances and the importance of context in interpretation. However the trend of fanciful interpretation gave birth to the following:
- Giving meaning to text, phrases and words without regard to the context
- Combining texts that contain similar words or phrases whether or not they were referring to the same idea
- Giving incidental aspects of grammar interpretative significance.

As a result of focusing on hidden meanings from incidental grammatical details and contrived numerical speculations, midrashic exegesis lost sight of actual meaning of texts.

Pehser Interpretation

This mode of interpretation was common to the Qumram communities. Though it borrowed heavily from midrashic exegesis it included the eschatological focus. The community believed that all scripture written by the prophets had a valid prophetic meaning which was to be imminently fulfilled through their community. Thus, apocalyptic interpretation was common.

Allegorical Interpretation

This method was based on the idea that the true meaning of scripture is beneath the literal meaning. It was historically developed by the Greeks in the attempt to resolve the tension between their religious myth tradition and their philosophical heritage. Jews also, who wished to remain true to the Mosaic tradition and also adopt Greek philosophy were faced with similar tension and some of them adopted the allegorical method. Philo of Alexandria was the most popular exponent of this method.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Discuss exegesis in the ancient Jewish period.

3.2   Patristic Hermeneutics

During this era, allegorical interpretation dominated the church. Though coming from a proper motive (the understanding of the Old Testament as a Christian document) it often neglects the author's intended meaning and literal understanding of the text to develop speculations.

Clement of Alexandria identified fives senses to the scripture: historical, doctrinal, prophetic, philosophical and mystical. Origen likened scripture to man's trichosomatic body and posits that scripture has three senses: literal, moral and allegory/mystical. Augustine upheld a fourfold sense of scripture: historical, aetiological, analogical and allegorical. It is important to note that though Augustine jettisoned most of the hermeneutical rules he developed, these rules are still of importance and are still in use in the contemporary days. Four of these rules that are still in use today are as follows:

- The interpreter must possess a genuine Christian faith.
- The literal and historical meaning should be held in high regard.
- The task of the expositor is to understand the meaning of the author and not to bring his own meaning to the text.
- A verse should be studied in its own context, not in isolation from the verses around it.

3.3   Medieval Hermeneutics

The word 'medieval' is derived from the Middle Ages of European history. It is a period in history which lasted for roughly a millennium, that is, a thousand years, commonly dated from the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century to the beginning of the Early Modern Period in the 16th century. According to Rogers and McKim (1979), the Middle Ages marked the birth of Europe as a political entity (p. 35). It was also the period that the Roman Church claimed to be the one true state (Southern, 1970). It was a period marked by the division of Western Christianity in the Reformation, the rise of humanism in the Italian Renaissance, and the beginnings of European overseas expansion. It has to be stated that this period was not an enterprising one for biblical hermeneutics. It is disheartening that even the clergy in this period largely remained ignorant of the biblical readings while the laity can be said to be largely ignorant.

At this period, the fourfold sense of Scripture as set forth by the Western Church fathers continues to hold sway. This fourfold mode of interpretation emphasized the distinction between the letter and the spirit of the text. The literal sense (*sensus historicus*) of Scripture denotes what the text states or reports directly. The allegorical sense (*sensus allegoricus*) explains the text with regard to the doctrinal content of church dogma, so that each literal element has a symbolic meaning, see also Typology (theology). The moral application of the text to the individual reader or hearer is the third sense, the *sensus tropologicus* or *sensus moralis*, while a fourth level of meaning, the *sensus anagogicus*, draws out of the text the implicit allusions it contains to secret metaphysical and eschatological knowledge, or *gnosis*.

The hermeneutical terminology used here is in part arbitrary. For almost all three interpretations which go beyond the literal explanations are in a general sense "allegorical". The practical application of these three aspects of spiritual interpretation varied considerably. Most of the time, the fourfold sense of the Scriptures was used only partially, dependent upon the content of the text and the idea of the exegete.

Hermeneutics in the Middle Ages witnessed the proliferation of non-literal interpretations of the Bible. Christian commentators could read Old Testament narratives *simultaneously* as pre-figurations of analogous New Testament episodes, as symbolic lessons about Church institutions and current teachings, and as personally applicable allegories of the Spirit. In each case, the meaning of the signs was constrained by imputing a particular intention to the Bible, such as teaching morality, but these interpretive bases were posited by the religious tradition rather than suggested by a preliminary reading of the text.

Despite the general darkness of this era, the following people stood out: Stephen Langdon, Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Lyra among others.

Stephen Langdon (1150-1228)

Stephen Langdon was the Archbishop of Canterbury. It was he who divided the Bible into its present chapters. Though, in conformity to the order of the day, he also interpreted the Bible to agree with the doctrines of the church, he held that the spiritual meaning should be emphasized over the literal since according to him, it was more helpful for preaching purposes and the growth of the church.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Thomas Aquinas was also called the Angelic Doctor and the Prince of Scholastics. He was an Italian philosopher and theologian whose works have made him the most important figure in Scholastic philosophy and one of the leading Roman Catholic theologians. Thomas had come into contact with Aristotlean philosophy at the University of Naples. This he incorporated into his own scheme of thought and produced his own theological and philosophical thought. Thomas can be regarded as the major figure of the medieval era.

Thomas also shifted attention away from allegorical interpretation. Thomas defended the literal sense and the use of grammatical and historical sense as the basis for all other senses of Scripture. He however argued that the interpreter must understand that the Bible has symbolic meaning since heavenly matters cannot be put in earthly terms without the use of symbolism. To him, interpreters should deal with the literal sense because it could be more easily ascertained and more easily controlled (Berndt, 1968). It is noteworthy that Thomas focused more on the words of Scripture in his hermeneutics.

Nicholas of Lyra (1270-1349)

Nicholas have been said to be one individual that significantly impacted hermeneutics in the Middle Ages. His approach to hermeneutics was firmly based on the literal sense. Though he recognized and accepted the four sense as proposed by the others, he insisted that the literal must be the basis for the other senses. The Catholic Encyclopaedia on-line quoting his writing, "Postillae perpetuae in universam S. Scripturam", that:

> … after stating that the literal sense of Sacred Scripture is the foundation of all mystical expositions, and that it alone has demonstrative force, as St. Augustine teaches, he deplores the state of Biblical studies in his time. The literal sense, he avers, is much obscured, owing partly to the carelessness of the copyists, partly to the unskillfulness of some of the correctors, and partly also to our own translation (the Vulgate), which not infrequently departs from the original Hebrew.

It has to be noted that much of Nicholas' work influenced Martin Luther so much that Virkler (1981) concludes that many believed that without Nicholas' influence, Luther would not have sparked the Reformation.

Self-Assessment Exercise

List the contribution of some notable scholars to interpretation in the medieval period.

3.4   Reformation Hermeneutics

The Reformation was essentially a Christian reform movement that started in Europe. Its beginning is usually dated with Martin Luther's 95 theses but it has so many precursors such as Johannes Hus. As a historical period, the Reformation is considered to have ended with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648; however, many of the denominations that arose during that period continue to exist and Protestantism remains one of the vibrant branches of Christianity to date. It has to be noted that one of the events that led to the Reformation is called the Renaissance. The Renaissance is to be discussed briefly because of its importance to hermeneutics.

The Renaissance is a series of literary and cultural movements in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries that began in Italy and eventually spread into Germany, France, England, and other parts of Europe. Renaissance

included the study of the great civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome. It was also in turn influenced by the concept of humanism, which emphasizes the worth of the individual.

> Renaissance humanists believed it was possible to improve human society through classical education. This education relied on teachings from ancient texts and emphasized a range of disciplines, including poetry, history, rhetoric (rules for writing influential prose or speeches), and moral philosophy (Encyclopaedia Wikkipedia)

One of the great humanists of the period that influenced biblical hermeneutics was Erasmus. As has been said above, the Renaissance called attention to classical languages, the Greek and the Hebrew languages did not escape the focus too. Erasmus facilitated the study of the biblical languages by publishing the first critical edition of the Greek New Testament. His work was followed by that of Reuchlin who translated a Hebrew Grammar and Lexicon. The rediscovery of the ancient texts and the studies that followed gradually led scholars to abandon the allegorical method of interpretation. This was replaced by the principle that the Scripture has only one single sense. The two greatest interpreters of the Reformation were Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Martin Luther was a German theologian and religious reformer, who initiated the Protestant Reformation. His influence extended beyond the borders of religion to politics, economics, education and language. This vast area of influence has made him one of the crucial figures in modern European history.

Luther's hermeneutics can be understood from his view of the Bible. The first of these views is that the Bible should not be viewed as any other literary piece; hence he asserted the issue of faith and the Spirit's illumination. Secondly, Luther maintained that the church should not determine what the Bible teaches but that the Bible should determine what the church should teach. He moved further to reject the allegorical method of interpretation which he referred to as 'dirt', or 'scum' or 'obsolete loose rags.'

In interpretation, Luther maintained that a proper understanding of the Bible must come from the literal understanding of the text of the Bible. He said further that the interpreter should consider the historical conditions, the

grammar and the context of the passage he wishes to interpret. Contrary to Roman Catholic teaching that the Bible is obscure and that it is only the priest or the church that can decipher its true meaning, Luther said that the Bible is a clear book and is simple to understand.

After having abandoned the allegorical method, Luther was faced with the dilemma of finding another means of making the Old Testament relevant to the modern Christian since up to that time allegory has been the only means by which the Old Testament has been interpreted. To fill this vacuum, Luther proposed the Christological principle. This principle later became Luther's hermeneutical principle. Consequently, this caused Luther to see Christ in many passages of the Old Testament, especially the Psalms. You need to note that even if we disagree today with Luther's Christological principles, "it did enable him to show the unity of Scripture without recourse to mystical interpretation of Old Testament text" (Virkler, 1981).

John Calvin (1509-1564)

John Calvin was a theologian, humanist, pastor and a leading figure in the Reformation. John Calvin was probably the greatest theologian of the Reformation. He did much to shape religious thinking as Protestantism advanced in Europe, and Calvinism became the basis of Presbyterianism. He also had a direct influence on the later relationships between Protestant churches and civil governments. Calvin founded a system of government that was based upon the teachings of the Bible and in which the civil powers were subordinate to the church and its ruling council. He encouraged production and commerce and insisted on the individual virtues of honesty, thrift, simplicity, and hard work. His ideas were well suited to the emerging capitalism of the 16th century.

Apart from being regarded as the greatest theologian of the Reformation, he can also be regarded as the greatest exegete of the Reformation. Like Luther, Calvin also regarded allegorical interpretation as the device of the devil to keep the meaning of the Bible obscured. The most popular phrase by which Calvin's hermeneutical principle is called is "Scripture interprets Scripture." This phrase signifies the emphasis that Calvin placed on the study of the context, grammar, words and the study of parallel passages rather than reading meanings to the words of the Bible. He is quoted by Farrar (1885) to have said "it is the first business of an interpreter to let the author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say."

Unlike Luther, he did not see Christ in every passage of the Bible. Despite the differences between Luther and Calvin in their hermeneutical principles, you have to take note that the hermeneutical principles they set forth became the foundation for modern orthodox Protestant hermeneutics.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Examine the most important contributions of Reformation to hermeneutics.

3.5   Post-Reformation Hermeneutics

The immediate post-Reformation period was launched by the Roman Catholic Church and it was marked by religious controversies. This was also called the Counter-Reformation by the Protestants. The Council of Trent met severally between 1545 and 1563 to produce a list of decrees wherein the dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church was declared. In response to this, the Protestants also developed their own statements. This was the period of notable statements like the Augsburg Confession, the Formula of Concord and the Helvetic Confession. It was a period filled with bitter religious controversies and almost every important city had its own favourite creed.

The struggle for doctrinal statements led to a decline in hermeneutical work. It was a period in which "exegesis became the handmaid of dogmatics, and often degenerated into mere proof-texting" (Virkler, 1981) and Farrar (1885) declared that the theologians of the period were reading "the Bible by the unnatural glare of theological hatred." Despite this dark cloud that hung over biblical hermeneutics, some light shone in the horizon in the likes of Philip Jakob Spener (1635-1705), August Hermann Francke (1663-1752) and Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752) who were called Pietists.

Pietism

Philip Jakob Spener was considered the leader of the Pietistic revival. He called for the end of bitter and needless controversies and a return to better Bible knowledge on part of all Christians and sound training for ministers. Pietists placed great emphasis upon the study of the Hebrew and Greek and the application of Scripture to daily life. They also drew on grammatical-historical interpretation.

You need to know that the fine moments of Pietism did not last for long as later Pietists discarded the grammatical-historical interpretation and

depended on what is called an inward light which finally gave way to subjectivism and reading of personal impressions into the biblical passage. In fact, according to Mayer (1969), "in some circles, Pietists almost ignored the Bible in favour of their personal feelings and emotions."

The Age of Enlightenment

The age of Enlightenment is also known as the age of Reason. This gave birth to Rationalism, the philosophical position that accepts reason as the only source of authority in determining the individual's course of action. It was at this time that everything possible was analyzed and criticized and the Bible was not an exception. The Enlightenment was urged by philosophers like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) who taught that reason alone is capable of deciding what is true and false. It was also at this period that empiricism, the philosophical position that true and valid knowledge can only be obtained by the five senses, developed. The combination of rationalism and empiricism was a big blow to faith. In fact, some rationalists felt the church was anti-reason as it upheld faith and revelation so they set out to destroy the church and all it stands for, including the Bible. It was this movement that gave birth to theological liberalism that started in the period classified as Modern Hermeneutics.

3.6 Modern Hermeneutics

Liberalism

As you have been told in the last sentence of the above paragraph, rationalism laid the foundation for theological liberalism. During this period, the human authorship of the books of the Bible rather than the divine authorship became the focus of scholars. You need to know that most of the scholars of the 19th century were theological liberals and they employed historical-critical methods to support their liberal views.

Many of the theologians of this period that were humanists and rationalists actually had a destructive effect on the Bible because they used the historical critical methods to read their own presuppositions into the Bible. They finally allowed their liberal presuppositions to control their hermeneutics.

The destructive tendencies of the early liberal theologians notwithstanding, there were a galaxy of theologians who used the same historical critical methods to arrive at a more constructive position on the Bible and actually

produced beautiful commentaries on the Bible. These men included J. B. Lightfoot, B. F. Wescott, F. J. A. Hort, John A. Broadus, J. P. Lange and F. Godet among others.

Romantic Hermeneutics

This model of hermeneutical principle was spearheaded by Friedrich Schleiermacher. He proposed that hermeneutics goes beyond rules for exegesis to the understanding of another mind or culture through written communication. To him, hermeneutics is the reconstruction of the mental process of the author from the author's language. it is to his credit that he recognized the circular nature of hermeneutical enquiry which means that the meaning of the text as a whole is dependent on the understanding of its parts (which is made up of words and phrases) and vice versa. You must note that romantic hermeneutics which is concerned with the recovery of the consciousness of past cultures and persons is furthered by Wilhelm Dilthey and Emilio Betti.

Existential and Phenomenological Hermeneutics

This is the name given to the hermeneutical principle as developed by Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Bultmann. Heidegger was one of the major existential philosophers. For him, pre-understanding was the major issue in hermeneutics. He feels that interpretation issues from the standpoint of the person doing the interpretation.

Rudolf Bultmann was a New Testament scholar but he incorporated anti-supernaturalism into his hermeneutics because he believed in empiricism as taught by science. His major contribution to hermeneutics is his principle of demythologizing. By demythologizing he meant the attempt to strip the essential gospel message from the mythologizing and ecclesiastical presentation of the gospel message.

The New Hermeneutics

The movement called the new hermeneutics actually started with the post-World War II work of Rudolf Bultmann. It was improved on by Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling who were his students. The most important hermeneutical principle of their work is the principle that the use of language in itself a hermeneutic. Thus for them, hermeneutics is not the science of interpretation but an investigation into the hermeneutical function of speech.

Liberation Hermeneutics

The rise of liberation theology which started in the Latin Americas automatically led to the development of liberation hermeneutics because liberation theology demanded a radical approach to hermeneutics. Liberation theology, as a theological reflection born out of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation demanded a correlate hermeneutical methodology that will not support the status quo but will question its validity. It is hermeneutics done from below, that is, from the lens of the poor and the exploited in terms of class, gender and race.

Taking the experience of these people into consideration, it declares that the Bible is not confined to the religious and spiritual matters alone but it is also concerned about the social, the economical and the political realities of the world. It is also called the hermeneutics and the theology of praxis because it places a premium on the action taken by the theologian in the process of liberating the people.

Liberation hermeneutics looks into the Bible to see what the word of God says to the situation of the oppressed. For example, it sees the Exodus as a call from God to be involved in the liberation of the oppressed. It also sees in the prophets, especially, Amos an example to the contemporary theologian. The declaration of Jesus in Luke 4:18 also stand out as a unique call to be involved in the quest of liberation.

African Hermeneutics

The development of liberation hermeneutics also led to the formation of other types of hermeneutics. This is because the insistence of the liberation hermeneutics on the situation or the context of the oppressed opened the eyes of many to the role context in hermeneutics. This led to the call for hermeneutics with particular reference to the situation of the theologian. Consequently, the Asians opted for what is called the 'Dalit theology' and the Africans developed the African hermeneutics.

If the origin of African Hermeneutics can be said to be the 1966 Consultation of African Theologians conference was held in Ibadan, Nigeria, then African hermeneutics would be 48 years old. Krog (2005) declares that "the development of African theology and hermeneutics has established itself, over the last 40 years, as a credible field of study and has made the Bible accessible to Africa".

African hermeneutics now can be done from the following sub-division: Liberation Hermeneutic (including, feminist hermeneutics, deliverance hermeneutics and black hermeneutics); White South African Hermeneutics, missiological hermeneutics and Neo-traditional hermeneutics. Buoyed by the similarities in the African worldview and the biblical worldview, the African hermeneutists insists that reading the Bible from the African viewpoint would be more meaningful to the Africans.

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit, you have taken a brief journey through the history of interpretation from the ancient Jewish hermeneutics to the modern day so called 'new hermeneutics'. You should have noticed that the history of interpretation could be divided into six epochs, namely: Ancient Jewish hermeneutics, Patristic hermeneutics, Mediaeval hermeneutics, Reformation hermeneutics, Post-Reformation hermeneutics and Modern Hermeneutics. You would have noticed that in each epoch there are scholars who would always remind the church of the role of literary interpretation as the basis for any other forms of interpretation and also the emphasis placed on grammatical and historical principles.

5.0   Summary

The following are the major points you have studied in this unit:

- The science and art of biblical interpretation began with Ezra.
- By Jesus' time, Jewish exegesis had four main categories: literal, midrashic, pesher and allegorical.
- The patristic era followed the Jewish era.
- Allegorical interpretation dominated the patristic era.
- This was followed by the medieval era.
- The medieval era was an era of darkness but Stephen Langdon, Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Lyra stood out calling for literal interpretation.
- Reformation hermeneutics began with Martin Luther who called for a single point sense of scripture and Christological interpretation.
- Calvin stressed historical and grammatical principles of interpretation.
- Post-Reformation period witnessed more of doctrinal controversies than development of hermeneutical principles.
- Pietism developed as a reaction to these doctrinal controversies.

- The Enlightenment led to the birth of destructive tendencies and liberalism.
- The new hermeneutics is one of the modern principles of interpretation focusing on language as hermeneutics in itself.

Self-Assessment Exercise

1. Discuss the principles of interpretation that were developed during the ancient Jewish interpretation.
2. What are the contributions of the enlightenment to hermeneutics?

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UNIT 3: Historical-Cultural and Contextual Analysis

Content

1.0   Introduction

In the previous unit, you have taken a brief excursion through the history of biblical hermeneutics from the ancient Jewish exegesis to the modern period of hermeneutics. If you have followed the historical analysis thoroughly, you would have noticed that the literal method that is based on the historical and contextual analysis has been the most enduring. Thus, in this unit we are going to examine the historical-cultural and contextual analysis and how to go about it so that one can correctly situate the passage of the Bible that is to be interpreted. You need to study this unit painstakingly so that you can master the process.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- State the role of historical-cultural and contextual analysis in interpretation.
- Identify the steps to take in determining the general historical-cultural context.
- List the steps in determining the specific historical-cultural context of a book.

- Discuss the process involved in locating the immediate context of a passage.

3.0   Main Content

3.1   An Introduction to Historical-Cultural and Contextual Analysis

The crucial role of the historical-cultural; and contextual analysis in hermeneutics is well articulated by Virkler (1981) who opines that, "the meaning of a text cannot be interpreted with any degree of certainty without historical-cultural and contextual analysis." In doing historical-cultural and contextual analysis, your aim is to reconstruct the situation and the needs of the original hearers and or readers as accurately as possible. Historical-cultural and contextual analyses are of two types: the general and the specific and each of these would be examined. In the process of this reconstruction, four questions would be answered, namely:

a. What is the general historical milieu of the passage?
b. What is the specific historical cultural context?
c. What is the purpose of the book?
d. What is the immediate context of the passage?

3.2   Determining the General Historical Context

In determining the general historical-cultural context of a given book, you need to ascertain the general historical situation facing the writer and the audience. These include the political, the social, the economical as well as the religious situations. It will also include details such as their source of livelihood and the threats and concerns they are faced with.

Having decided these ones, the next step is to determine the culture -locked words and actions. Let us take Sarah's action on the solution to her perceived barrenness as an example. According to Genesis 16:2, Sarah lured her husband into marital relationship with her maid, Hagar so that she might obtain children by her. Culturally, during their time, what she has done is culturally acceptable and any child or children that Hagar would have had technically belonged to Sarah. Rachael did the same thing with Jacob. Examining or analysing such actions with the 21st century eye may lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

Finally, you need to take the level of the spiritual commitment of the recipients of the book into consideration. Most of the books of the Bible were written during a period characterized by low ebb of spirituality, discouragement and temptation and so the meaning of the text would be misunderstood if thus factor is left unnoticed.

To aid you in this task, you need to consult books on Bible Geography, Bible History and on the culture of biblical times. I will advise you to read at least two books on each topic rather than depend on bits of information that can be readily gleaned from concordances and dictionaries. Examples of books that can be used are:

C. B. Murphey. *The Dictionary of Biblical Literacy*.
C. K. Barret. *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*

3.3 Determining the Specific Historical-Cultural Context of a Book

After having uncovered the general historical-cultural situation, you now need to take a step forward to determine the historical-cultural context of the book you are working on. To do this, you need to answer the following questions:

a. Who was the author of this book?
b. What was the author's spiritual background and experience?
c. Who is or are the recipient(s) of the book?
d. What is or are the peculiar situation(s) of the recipient(s)?
e. What was the author's intention or purpose of writing this book?

Information about the author and the recipients can be discovered from what we call internal and external data. By internal data, we refer to evidences that can be taken from biblical books especially the book in focus but not limited to it alone. By external data, we refer to evidences from sources other than biblical books. These usually cover materials written by early church fathers and other authors who are not even Christians.

In your study of these data you must be careful not to be guided by prejudices in these analyses. It is also important for you to know that you may have evidences that may not give you any conclusive evidence from both internal and external data. An example of such is the book of Hebrews. Firstly, the book itself, unlike all other epistles has no autograph, that is, the writer did not mention his name at the beginning in line with the Hellenistic epistolary structure adopted by most New Testament epistle writers nor did

it have reference in any other place within the book. Secondly, most critical church fathers did not classify it along Pauline books and most biblical manuscripts do not also indicate that it belongs to the Pauline corpus. Today, no serious New Testament scholar would attribute the book to Paul though church tradition has ascribed it to Paul. On the book, Virkler (1981) has this to say:

> The authorship of Hebrews is entirely another matter. We can say with considerable certainty that it was probably not Paul because the literary expression, thought forms, and attitudes towards the Mosaic Law found in this book differ significantly from those found in books of known Pauline authorship. However, beyond this we have little solid evidence of its exact authorship. Most hypotheses offered are conjectures unsupported by hard evidence (p.87).

You also need to take note of books like Psalms and Proverbs that are books of multiple authorship. The books are traditionally ascribed to one author when even internal evidence points to the contrary. For example, the book of Proverbs is traditionally ascribed to Solomon but internal evidence shows that Proverbs 30 and 31 are not. Proverbs 30:1 reads:

> The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, the oracle. The man declares to Ithiel and Ucal.

The above sentence shows clearly that the following verses are the collection of Agur, the son of Jakeh. The same goes for Proverbs 31 as the first verse reads:

> The words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught him.

After determining the author, you need to study about him and his entire history. Bible Dictionaries and Commentaries would be useful in this regard. Remember that because the personality of a writer cannot be easily divorced from his writings, the book you are reading too would help you deduce much about the author.

The next step after the settlement of authorship issue is that of the recipients. You can conclude generally that the Jews were the recipients of most of the Old Testament books except where texts indicate the contrary. Despite this general assertion, you need to determine the condition of the Jews at that period. For example, the situation of the Jews during the

Mosaic period is different from that of the period of the judges and that of the monarchy is also different. It is important to note that the situation of the audience is an important process in hermeneutics.

Finally, we now come to the issue of the purpose of writing. There are three major ways in which you can deduce the main purpose of the writers. The first way is to locate the author's explicit statement, concerning his purpose, if there is any. The author's explicit statement is the most direct way of stating purpose. Examples of this kind of statement can be found in Luke 1:1-4 and John 20:31.

> Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4).

> But these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name (John 20:31).

It is also possible to locate the author's purpose through his use of repetition of certain phrases.

The second way is to look for the hortatory or parenthetical aspect of the book. This is based on the premise that exhortations flow from the purpose and also give important clues as regarding the author's intentions. For example, in the book of Jude, verse 3 contains the author's exhortation:

> Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints (Jude 1:3).

From this exhortation, it is clear that the purpose of the writer is to encourage the believers to keep the only true faith in the face of heresy that is fast gaining ground in the church. At times, 'therefore' is a key word that could be a pointer to the author's exhortation especially in Paul who characteristically uses the linker 'therefore' as a link between

theoretical/doctrinal assertions and practical applications. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:6, Paul writes:

> So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and
> sober (1 Thessalonians 5:6)

The above statement is an exhortation to watchful vigilance for the *parousia*, thus revealing the purpose of the writer, at least, as far as that passage is concerned.

The third way to locate the author's purpose is to critically examine points or issues that are emphasized and those that are omitted. This is particularly true of all historical books because there is no way the writer could write everything that has happened, thus they usually end up picking or using those events that would achieve their purpose. Let us examine 2 Chronicles on this. The selection of events is revealed by the phrase "now the acts of ---, first and last, are indeed written in the books of the kings of Judah and Israel," which was used of all the kings mentioned. Another repetitive phrase is, "he did what was right" or "what was wrong". The purpose of the book is therefore to show that as long as Israel remained faithful to the covenant of the Lord, she would be victorious but would also go down if she disobeyed the covenant.

Self-Assessment Exercise

What elements would you consider in determining the specific historical-cultural setting of a book?

3.4   Determining the Immediate Context of a Passage

After determining the specific context of the book, you now have to zero down to the passage you want to interpret and the first step in this is to determine its immediate context. The importance of the immediate context is underscored by the fact that it is the only antidote to proof-texting. Once the context of a passage is ignored, the statements and teachings therein are susceptible to heretical interpretations.

The first step in determining the immediate context is to pick up the major block of materials and also determine how they fit together into a whole. This could be done by examining the outline of the whole book. Various Study Bibles have already given outlines of the books of the Bible and these could be of help to you.

The second step is to discover the contribution of the passage to the author's flow of argument. This can be deduced by locating the relationship between the passage in focus and the passages immediately preceding it and that immediately following it. In most cases, there would be logical connection between the three blocks.

Thirdly, you need to determine the perspective of the author in the passage. Two major perspectives exist. The author can speak as God's spokesman especially when writing on moral issues and they can also speak in phenomenological manner which occurs mostly during narrative sections. You must note that making this distinction is of paramount importance to accurate exegesis.

Fourthly, you need to determine the focus of the passage. Doing this would help you to separate the main lesson being taught from incidental details only. An example of this could be drawn from 1 Corinthians 12:12 where Paul used the body metaphor to discuss the membership of Christians in the church. The ridiculousness of pressing incidental details and analogies too far can be seen in the story I once heard of a preacher who was using this passage to preach. He got to the point of saying that some people are like artificial teeth because one day they are in the church and the next day they are not. Indeed, this point seems interesting and fitting but it is still a misreading of the Scriptures. You need to know that the Pelagian error which rocked the church in the early fifth century stems out of this error of pressing incidentals and analogies too far. They used the return of the prodigal in the parable of the Prodigal Son to teach that humanity needs no mediator to return to God.

Fifthly, you need to determine who is being addressed in the passage you are interpreting. No matter how spiritual you may be, one basic fact you must know is that not all the bible promises are directed to you and neither could you claim everything. This statement seems out of place in an age that loves to sing "Abraham's blessings are mine!" let me also tell you a joke that has become commonplace in theological circles which is used to taunt believers who believe in opening the Bible at random and obeying the command therein. This young man was said to have opened Matthew 27:5 which says, "…and he went away and hanged himself." Believing that the message could not have been for him, he decided to reopen the Bible. The second time, he opened to Luke 10:37 which say: "Go and do likewise!" he finally decided to open the Bible the third time and he opened to John 13:27 which also read: "What you do, do quickly!"

To arrive at the message of the passage of the Bible systematically, the following are the steps that you can take:

- Identify who is speaking
- Is the instruction or message normative or descriptive?
- To whom was it directed?

Finally, take note that most descriptive passages (these are passages where what happened at a particular time was described or related) should not be taken to mean that it is applicable to everybody, everywhere and at every time. However some passages are prescriptive because they seem to articulate normative principles. This principle would come to play seriously in interpreting the Book of Acts and the Epistles (which forms the bulk of the New Testament). Identifying this problem, Fee and Stuart (1993) write:

> Does the book of Acts have a word that not only describes the primitive church but speaks as a norm to the church at all times? If there is such a word, how does one discover it or set up principles to aid in hearing it? If not, then what do we do with the concept of precedent? In short, just exactly what role does historical precedent play in Christian doctrine or in the understanding of Christian experience?

Let me briefly cite an example here. The early church as described in the book of Acts worshipped both on Saturdays and Sundays. If it is normative, then the contemporary church has violated a principle. You will deal with later in this course. However, remember to identify in any passage you are interpreting, if the message is descriptive or prescriptive.

4.0 Conclusion

You have learnt in this unit that the meaning of a text cannot be interpreted with any degree of certainty without historical-cultural and contextual analysis. You were also taken further to steps that have to be taken to determine the historical-cultural and contextual analysis which includes the determination of the general historical context, the specific historical-cultural context of the book as well as the immediate context of the passage to be interpreted.

5.0 Summary

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- That the meaning of a text cannot be interpreted with any degree of certainty without historical-cultural and contextual analysis.
- Determining the general historical context includes the political, the social, the economical as well as the religious situations.
- You also need to determine culture-locked words and actions and the spiritual level of the recipients.
- The next level is the determination of the specific historical-cultural context of the book.
- In doing this, the authorship of the book has to be determined through the analysis of internal and external evidence.
- The authorship is followed by the determination of the recipients.
- After ascertaining the authorship and the recipients comes the purpose of writing.
- The purpose can be identified through the explicit statement of purpose from the author, the analyses of repetitions, the analyses of then exhortations in the book and an examination of the omitted and emphasised points in the book.
- Finally the immediate context of the book has to be determined.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Discuss the steps you have to take in determining the historical-cultural and contextual situation of a biblical passage.

6.0   REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS

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UNIT 4:   Lexical-Syntactical Analysis

CONTENT

1.0   Introduction

In the previous unit, you have examined closely the historical principle of interpretation which is one of the principles of interpretation that has endured over time. You would have understood the role of context in interpretation as emphasised by the principle. In this unit, you would be examining the twin sister of historical principle, namely, grammatical principle of interpretation. I will urge you to pay close attention to the discussions of the role of language in interpretation.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Define lexical and syntactical analysis
- Identify the steps involved in lexical-syntactical analysis
- Discuss the methods which the interpreter can use to determine the meaning of a word.
- Identify tools and resources that can aid you in the process of lexical-syntactical analysis

3.0   Main Content

3.1   Defining Lexical-Syntactical Analysis

The medium through which the message of the Bible has come to us is the language of humanity. The language through which this message has come is made up of words which are used closely together. Consequently, lexical-

syntactical analysis is "the study of the meaning of individual words (lexicology) and the way those words are combined (syntax) in order to determine more accurately the author's intended meaning." (Virkler, 1981). Gorman (2001) defines it as "the quest to understand words, idioms, grammatical forms, and the relationships among these items according to the norms of usage as at the time the text was produced." The last phrase added by Gorman is very important because the dynamism of language would not allow us to use the biblical words with contemporary connotation. For example, the word 'silly' sometimes ago in English language refers to someone who is innocent, but today it means someone who lacks commonsense.

Lexical-syntactical analysis first identifies how an author has used his word (it could be used literally or figuratively or symbolically) and interprets the word accordingly. This analysis is based on the fact that words have variety of meanings and it is the context that would determine the particular meaning of the word. For example, the word 'flesh' as used in the New Testament has three different meanings:

a. It could mean the human body as in John 1:14 which says "and the word became flesh." Here, what it means is that Jesus in incarnation took up our physical human nature which is made up of flesh.
b. Flesh could also mean fallen human nature as in Galatians 5:16 which reads "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." In this verse, Paul used the word 'flesh' to mean man's sinful indignation and not the physical flesh as in John 1:14.
c. Flesh could also mean outward ceremonial religion as in Galatians 3:3 which reads thus: "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" in this verse, Paul used the word flesh to mean the Jewish observance of the ritual of circumcision.

It is lexical-syntactical analysis that would help the interpreter in deciding what the meaning of a word is within the passage in which it is used. As Virkler (1981) concludes:

> Lexical-syntactical analysis is needed because without it we have no valid assurance that our interpretation is the meaning God intended to convey, and we have no grounds for saying that our interpretations of Scripture are more valid than those of heretical groups (p. 95).

What are the factors that make lexical-syntactical analysis important?

3.2   Steps in Lexical-Syntactical Analysis

Undertaking lexical-syntactical analysis could be very frustrating and boring, the results however is usually exciting and meaningful that it is worth all the troubles that goes with it. Virkler (1981) has identified a seven-step procedure namely, identification of the general literary form, tracing the development of the author's theme and the fitting of the passage into the context, identifying the natural divisions of the text, identifying the connecting words within paragraphs and sentences, determining the meaning of individual words, syntactical analysis and the writing of the results of the analysis in a lay manner. These steps would be adopted here.

Identifying the General Literary Form

You need to know that the literary form an author decides to use in conveying his message goes a long way to influence the manner in which his/her work would be interpreted. For example, an author using poetry as the medium of expression would not use his words the way an author using the prose style. This is because poetry allows for what is called the poetic license, that is, the ability to use words the way that best conveys the intended meaning.

The generally recognized literary forms are prose, poetry and apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic writings are very predominant in Daniel and Revelation and they often contain symbolically used words. In prose and poetry, words can also be used literally and figuratively but figurative languages are more predominant in poetry while literal language dominates the prose style.

Tracing the Development of the Author's Theme

The development of the author's theme is a continuation of the contextual analysis. This step is important for two main reasons. Firstly, as had been reiterated earlier, the context remains the best source for determining the meaning of the word as intended by the author from the several possible meanings of the word. Secondly, if a word is taken out of context, there is the danger of becoming overwhelmed by the technicalities of linguistic analysis that you will lose sight of the primary intended meaning.

Identifying the Natural Divisions of the Text

What do we mean by natural division of the text? I need to let you know that the divisions of the Bible into chapters and verses that we are so used to today were not originally part of the Bible. The contemporary division of the Bible into chapters reflected that which was invented by Archbishop Stephen Langton about the beginning of the thirteenth century. They were invented to make the reading of the Bible easy for the modern people and as an aid for locating passages. Though this was done for a good purpose, it "has the distinct disadvantage of dividing the author's thoughts unnaturally" (Virkler, 1981). Another problem arising from this division is also highlighted by Virkler (1981). He said:

> In modern prose style we are accustomed to the divisions of thoughts into conceptual units through the use of sentences and paragraphs. The first sentence in a paragraph serves either as a transition from one concept to the next or as a thesis which is elaborated in subsequent sentences (p. 98).

This division to the modern reader, thus become a serious disadvantage because whenever the divisions made are unnatural, it will lead to a break in the conceptual units. It is in a bid to ratify this seeming problem that contemporary translations retained verse numberings but placed the ideas in sentences and paragraphs. Let me explain this more graphically:

> In the Revised Standard Version, the twelfth Chapter (that is of Revelation) ends with the sentence "And he stood on the sand of the sea," while in the KJV, the same sentence opens Chapter 13 and there it reads "And he stood on the sand of the sea…" (Adewale, 1997).

You may pick up your Bible and examine the two parallel versions so that you can have a visual image of what I have said.

Identifying the Connecting Words within Paragraphs and Sentences

Connecting words can be identified as words that are used to connect ideas within the discourse. This includes conjunctions, prepositions and relative pronouns. When you come across such words, you need to ask certain questions to get a clue to what is being discussed. For example, when a pronoun is used, you need to ask where or what is the antecedent? And where you come across words such as 'therefore" you have to understand that it is a "connecting link between a theoretical argument and the practical

applications of that argument." (Virkler, 1981). Let me explain this briefly with a practical example. Ephesians 6:13 reads, "therefore, take upon the full armour of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." The word 'therefore' shows that there is a link between what is to follow and what has been said before the word. if you look closely at the passage, you will discover that the passage actually begins from verse 10 of Chapter 6 of Ephesians. Therefore verses 13 to 17 discuss the practical application of what has been said theoretically in verses 10 to 12.

Determining the Meaning of Individual Words

To understand the message of any writer you need to establish the basic meaning of the words the author has used. Doing a word analysis is important because "words that survive long in a language acquire many denotations (specific meanings) and connotations (additional implications). Bedsides their specific meanings, words often have a variety of popular denotations, i.e., usages found in ordinary conversations." (Virkler, 1981).

Before going to examine the manner in which the determination of the meaning of words could take, we need to look at some fundamental rules concerning the issue. Bock (1989) identified three fundamental rules and these would be adapted here.

1. You must pursue the meaning intended by the author for his original readers. Your goal as an interpreter is to understand what the original author said through the terms used. You must understand that words do not just possess meanings but receive meaning through the one who produced them.
2. To establish the precise meaning of a word you must recognize its wide range of meanings. You must remember that the meaning of a word can change depending on the time, situation and the person using the word.
3. You must remember that words operate in a context and do receive their meaning from that context. Individual words do not give the accurate meaning of passages of the Bible and this is why in this unit we are treating both lexical and syntactical analysis as a single unit.

Now, we can go on to discuss how to get the meaning of individual words. Virkler (1981) identifies three methods to be used in determining the denotations of a word.

Firstly, you can study the ways the word has been used in other ancient secular literature, the Septuagint as well as other biblical books either by the same or another author.

Secondly, you need to study the synonyms of the word you are studying and compare the similarities as well as the differences.

Thirdly, you can study the etymology of the word. By etymology, we mean the origin of a word and the history of its usage, that is, how it has arrived at its current form and meaning. An etymology often shows the different forms the word has taken in passing from one language to another, and sometimes shows related words in other languages (Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, 2008).

You need to note however that using etymology has to be done with a lot of caution and expertise since it is fraught with two serious disadvantages. Firstly, most of the histories given to words are usually conjectural. For example, if you look for the meaning of the word 'Esther" you will discover that, most if not all Bible Dictionaries, will trace the word to two different languages. Thus, it can be said that no one is sure what the actual root is! Secondly, the radical changing nature of words across time makes such studies difficult. In etymology, the histories of words are usually taken even beyond the time of the author and it is possible that the author may not be aware of such meanings not to talk of intending them. You need to know also that these kinds of etymology are not done through the words of the English Bible but through Hebrew and Greek languages.

Your mastery of the Greek and Hebrew knowledge notwithstanding, you can still do some etymological study of words with the aid of some tools. Some of these tools have been mentioned earlier, but they will be cited specifically now.

Concordances

A concordance is a book containing a list of all the times a given word is used in the Bible. A good concordance that you would find extremely useful is the Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. Strong has compiled all the words used in English and shown their Greek and Hebrew occurrences (already transliterated so that it can be pronounced and understood without stress by those whose knowledge of Hebrew and Greek is not deep). It also goes ahead to list the words so transliterated. For example, through Strong you will discover that the word peace occurs more than 400 times in the

English Bible and that ten Hebrew words and six Greek words are rendered peace in the English Bible.

Lexicons

A lexicon is "a reference book that alphabetically lists words and their meanings, especially of an ancient language" (Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, 2008). Though in a sense, a lexicon is a dictionary, but the dictionary of ancient language is more appropriately referred to as a lexicon. Thus we have Greek and Hebrew lexicons. Like a dictionary that they are, lexicons would list the various denotations of each word listed. The very good ones go further to discuss the various occurrences of the word in both ancient secular and biblical literature with specific examples. For example, Arndt and Gingrich (trans.) (1957) in giving the meaning of βα/qov(*bathos*) indicated that the word was used by Aeschylus, Herodotus, the Septuagint, Philo as well as Josephus. After giving the general meaning as 'depth', it goes ahead to treat literal and figurative meaning citing the literature in which they have been so used. The following are recommended lexicons if you are able to lay your hands upon them:

Brown, Driver, and Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*.

Gesenius. *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*

Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Translated and edited by Arndt and Gingrich.

Thayer. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

Theological Wordbooks

The advantage that the theological wordbooks have over the lexicons is that they often give more exhaustive analysis of the words listed. The most popular of all theological wordbooks are the 10 Volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* edited by Kittel and Friedrich and the twin sister 4 Volume *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* edited by Botterweck and Ringgren. They are both referred to as TDNT and TDOT. Please note that there is a one volume abridged version of the TDNT by G. W. Bromiley. The TDNT, in its analysis of any word would trace its usage of Greek words from secular Greek sources, the Old Testament, Philo, Josephus, pseudipigraphical and rabbinical literature, the

various New Testament books as well as the usage by the apostolic fathers. The TDOT on the other hand usually begin from the etymology to usage in Ancient Near East and the usage in the Old Testament and at times makes reference to the usage of the word in the Septuagint (LXX).

Determining the Meaning of Words within a Specific Context

After the first step which is the determination of the various meanings a word possess, the second step is to determine which of the various meanings of the word is intended by the author in the passage under analysis. The following are analyses of the methods that can be used in determining the specific meaning of a word.

Highlighting Explanatory Phrases Given by the Author

There are times when an author, after using a key word, would go further to explain what he means by the word. Let us look at an example from 1 Corinthians 7:1-5.

> 1 Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.
> 2 But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.
> 3 The husband should fulfill his duty toward his wife, and likewise the wife toward her husband.
> 4 The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*.
> 5 Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

In verse two, the word 'have' occurs. The Greek word used here is e0xe/tw. If you check the lexicon for the meaning of the word, you will see words like: have, hold, keep and preserve. Out of all these general meanings, the best have been used by the various translations. The question now is, did Paul use the word literally or metaphorically? A very good treatment of the following verses would show you that verse three; four and five are further explanation of verse two. In verse three, Paul expanded the meaning of 'have' to the fulfilment of conjugal rights by the couple to one another. In verse four, the conjugal right is delimited to that which concerns the physical body of the couple. In verse five, he stated that the only reason for

the non-fulfilment of this duty is mutual agreement. All these cue up with verse one where the issues raised is that of touching a woman, it would be clear to you that 'have' in verse two is used metaphorically to mean 'sexual intercourse'.

Subject and Predicate Relationship

There are times when the subject and the predicate within a sentence may explain one another. Thus, it is important also in the bid to determine the specific contextual meaning of a word to see if the subject and the predicate did not explain one another.

Analysis of Parallelism

This analysis is very relevant to the Old Testament where the use of poetry is very high. Parallelism is one of the features of Hebrew poetry. Parallelism is "the deliberate repetition of words or sentence structures for effect" (Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, 2008). Three types of parallelism can be identified in Hebrew poetry, namely: synonymous parallelism, antithetical parallelism and synthetic parallelism.

In synonymous parallelism, the second line of the poem repeats the idea of the first line but in different words. An example is Proverbs 6:16 which reads:

> There are six things which the Lord hates
> Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him

In antithetical parallelism, the idea of the second line is in sharp contrast with the idea of the first line. An example is Proverbs 10:7 which reads:

> The memory of the righteous is blessed
> But the name of the wicked will rot

In synthetic parallelism the second line carries the idea in the first line to a logical conclusion. An example is Proverbs 10:26 which reads:

> Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the
> eyes So is the lazy ones to those who send him

Looking for the Possibility of a Figure of Speech

Figures of speech are words or group of words used to give particular emphasis to an idea or sentiment. The special emphasis is typically accomplished by the user's conscious deviation from the strict literal sense of a word, or from the more commonly used form of word order or sentence construction (Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, 2008). You need to note that figures of speech have been in use since the ancient times.

You need to know that figures of speech as well as idioms are generously used in the Bible since they are part of everyday use of language. A good example of such usage can be found in Song of Solomon 8:8 which reads:

> We have a little sister, And she has no breasts; What shall we
> do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for?

In the above quotation, "she has no breasts" is a figure of speech and so cannot be interpreted literally. If taken literally, it would mean the lady in question is malformed. In interpreting figures of speech, attempt must be made to understand the figure and how it is used in the culture from which it comes.

Studying Parallel Passages

To understand the intension of an author you need to gather additional information about the word or phrase as they are used in clearer passages. Virkler (1981) identifies two types of parallels: the verbal and the real parallel. While verbal parallels involves the use of similar words which would have different meanings, real parallels are different words with same meaning.

Syntactical Analysis

Syntactical analysis deals with expression of thought through grammatical forms and relationships within the words used. This is what makes language learning difficult. It is difficult because when language is to be learnt, the learner does not only learn the alphabets, the words and pronunciation, but the arrangements of words and their relationships.

As a biblical student, you must have an adequate knowledge of English language and at least a working knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. Thus you should know that English language, being an analytical language uses word order as a guide to meaning. In English language, the word order is: Subject, Verb and Direct Object. Hebrew, though is also an analytical language, it is not as highly analytical as the English language. The Greek

language however is synthetic and therefore does not depend on the word order for meaning. Rather, it depends on word-endings and or case - endings. You would remember that I have always asked you to memorize the word endings as they are crucial to your understanding of the language.

Tools for Syntactical Analysis

Syntax actually is not what you just learn in the books but you can have as much information on them that you need for your understanding of this important aspect of the language. The tools that you would readily find useful include the following:

A. T. Robertson. *Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*

A. T. Robertson. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*

Others include expository commentaries like:

William Tyndale. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*

Writing of the results of the analysis in a lay manner

Even if you know the entire technicalities involved in the syntactical analysis, you must know that the users of the end product of your syntactical analysis are laymen hence you must write your report in a non-technical language that would be understandable to the laymen. Do not lose sight of the purpose of your analysis because of the temptation to be impressive.

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit you have been exposed to the issues involved in lexical-syntactical analysis. You have been taught that the lexical-syntactical analysis is important to biblical hermeneutics because the Bible has come to us through the language of humanity which is bound by the rules of lexis and syntax. You have also been given the seven steps involved in this analysis. You must have also noticed the importance of the context in the process of interpretation as well as the process through which the meaning of the words used by the author in a specific context. You must also remember that words that are part of figures of speech are not to be interpreted apart from the figures of speech.

5.0   Summary

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- The first step in lexical-syntactic analysis is the identification of the general literary form.
- The three major forms are prose, poetry and apocalyptic literature.
- The second step is the tracing of the development of the author's theme.
- The author's theme is the context within which a word is used and it is the best source for determining the meaning of a word. Taking a word out of its context also opens the word up for misinterpretation.
- The third step is to locate the natural divisions of the text to help in appreciating the flow of the author's thought.
- The fourth step is to identify the connecting words within paragraphs and sentences.
- The fifth step is to determine the meaning of individual words. This step can be taken through the search of the usage of the word in ancient secular literature or the Septuagint or other biblical books. The word could also be studied through its synonym and it could also be studied etymologically.
- The sixth step is to determine the meaning of the word within a specific context. This can be determined by taking note of the explanations given by the author to the word or by exploring the subject predicate relationship or by an analysis of parallelism.
- There are three types of parallelism: synonymous parallelism, antithetical parallelism and synthetic parallelism.
- The seventh step is to determine if the word is not part of a figure of speech. If it is, interpret the figure of speech as a whole.
- Syntactical analysis is the expression of thought within grammatical form and relationship within the words used.

Self-Assessment Exercise

a. Discuss the steps to take in determining the meaning of a word.
b. How would parallelism aid in determining the meaning of a word within its context?

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Module 2   Interpreting the Old Testament

Unit 1:   Interpreting the Law
Unit 2:   Interpreting Prophetic Books
Unit 3:   Interpreting Historical Narratives
Unit 4:   Interpreting Wisdom Literature
Unit 5:   Interpreting the Psalms

MODULE TWO   INTERPRETING   THE   OLD TESTAMENT

I welcome you to the second module of this course in biblical hermeneutics. I believe you have enjoyed the first module that dwelt squarely on the history and methods of interpretation. Your understanding of this module depends on your mastery of module one. This is because most of the general principles highlighted in module one would now be practically utilized in this module and Module Three.

Before we set out on Module Two, there are two basic fundamental issues to be resolved. First, what is the Old Testament? Second, how should Christians react to the Old Testament? In defining the Old Testament, Mayer (1968, 4th printing) says the Old Testament is:

> the story of the great acts of judgement and deliverance by which God chose for Himself a people, the children of Israel, and then kept them as His chosen nation despite their sinfulness and repeated rebellion in order that His covenant promises to the whole human race might be preserved and fulfilled in the Son of David, the Christ, who became the Son of Man, Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

Though this definition is holistic, Mayer is speaking from the post- cross perspective. Indeed the use of the term 'Old Testament' already smells bias. You need to know that what today is called Old Testament is to the Jews, the original recipients of these writings; in fact to Jesus and the early church what is called 'Scripture'! It is the contemporary church that calls it Old Testament.

This leads to the issue of the Christian stand on the Old Testament. There are two major positions as of today. On the one hand there are those who feel that the era of the Old Testament is gone and as such they are not bound to keep the laws written therein. On the other hand, there are those who feel that the Old Testament is the basis of the New; hence the Old still stands in the process of understanding the New. You must remember always that despite the fact that both Jesus and the New Testament writers regarded the Old Testament as incomplete revelation "they still accepted the Scriptures (that is, the Old Testament) as God's first word as wholeheartedly as other Jews did." Note this: no matter your stand on the Old Testament you are still faced with the problem of interpreting and appreciating its significance in the contemporary world.

UNIT 1:   Interpreting the Old Testament Laws

Content

1.0   Introduction
2.0   Intended Learning Objectives
3.0   Main Content
        3.1   Introducing the Old Testament Laws
        3.2   The Dilemma of Interpreting Old Testament Laws
        3.3   Types of the Old Testament Laws
        3.4   Categories of the Old Testament Laws
        3.5   Traditional Interpretation of the Old Testament Laws
        3.6   Steps in Interpreting the Old Testament Laws
        3.7   Practical Application
4.0   Conclusion
5.0   Summary
6.0   Tutor-Marked Assignments
7.0   References/Further Readings

1.0   Introduction

In the first module of this course you have learnt mostly the general theoretical approaches to the issues of interpreting the Bible as well as the steps involved in the historical-cultural and contextual analysis as well as lexical-syntactical analysis. In this module, you will begin to examine the applicability of these general principles to the interpretation of the Old Testament beginning from the Old Testament Laws. You will discover that it would be a very interesting exercise, if you approach this module with an open mind.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Identify the usage of the term 'law' in the Old Testament
- List the various classifications of the 'law'

- Discuss the various positions of Christians today over the Old Testament Laws
- List the various ways the laws have been interpreted traditionally
- Discuss the steps involved in interpreting the Old Testament laws

3.0   Main Content

3.1   Introducing the Old Testament Laws

The usage of the term 'law' in the Old Testament has always been fluid that there is the need to clarify what is meant when the term is used. Firstly, the term 'law' can be used to designate the first five books of the Old Testament. Such a designation is easily noticeable when the Bible uses the phrase "the Law and the Prophets" which actually is a reference to the entire Scriptures. Secondly, it could also refer to the body of materials which begins from Exodus 19 and ends at Deuteronomy, though not all the contents are exactly legal in outlook. This is the position taken by Bradshaw when he said, "I will be defining the Law as the commandments given to Moses for the people of Israel, which start in Exodus19 until the end of Deuteronomy". Thirdly, the law at times can just be a simple reference to the Decalogue. However for the purpose of this course, the term law shall be used to refer to the body of about 650 laws that Israel was expected to keep as a sign of her obedience to God's covenant.

3.2   The Dilemma of Interpreting Old Testament Laws

These laws are the most enigmatic part of the Old Testament to the Christian today. Again Bradshaw confirmed this position as he agrees that "from the earliest days of the church Christians have struggled to understand how to interpret the Old Testament Law." In fact, most of the laws contained in the Old Testament are actually strange to modern readers (Hays, 2001). This is what actually led to the issue of the Christian attitude to the law as highlighted above.

For an adequate understanding of what the Christian attitude to the law should be, you need to understand the functional development of the Law. That there was a gradual development of the law is not an overstatement as "God gave each generation the instruction it needed for its way of life" (Murphey, 1989) and that apart from the early Ten Commandments, the rest of "the covenant code most likely represents an accumulation of

laws coming from later periods of Israel's history" (Flanders, Gapps and Smith, 1973).

Our understanding of the law must begin from the covenant nature of the law. These commandments form part of the covenant between God and Israel. You should know that a covenant is an agreement between two people or two groups that involves promises on the part of each to the other (Lockyer, ed., 1987). The Old Testament laws contain the same element as other biblical covenants and their extra-biblical counterparts. For your understanding, a covenant format has six parts, namely:

a. Preamble: in the preamble, the parties to the covenant are identified as in Exodus 20:2.
b. Prologue: the prologue would briefly describe the circumstances that led to the parties to become covenanted to one another as in Deuteronomy 1:1-5.
c. Stipulations: these are the laws that are expected to be kept under the terms of the covenant which in this case are the laws of the Old Testament.
d. Witnesses: the witnesses are those that are expected to enforce the covenant.
e. Sanctions: these are the blessings and the curses that functions as incentives for keeping the covenant as in Deuteronomy 27:1-30:30.
f. Document Clause: this is the provision for regular review of the covenant so that it will not be forgotten.

With this brief exposition of the covenant and its nature, it would be clear to you that the Old Testament laws are the stipulations to be observed by Israel who has entered into a covenant relationship with Yahweh.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Why is the interpretation of the Old Testament Laws problematic today?

3.3   Types of the Old Testament Laws

There are generally two types of law identifiable in the Old Testament. They are the conditional and the absolute laws.

The Conditional Law

The conditional law is also called the casuistic law or the case law. It is called the conditional law because for it to be applied, certain conditions must be fulfilled. An example of such law is Deuteronomy 15:12-17:

> If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free. And when you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your vine and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you. And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you today.
>
> And it shall come about if he says to you. "I will not go out from you," because he loves you and your household, since he fares well with you; then you shall take an owl and pierce it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your servant forever. And also you shall do likewise to your maidservant.

It is glaring that this law applies only if one is a Hebrew who has a Hebrew slave or slaves. If one is not a Hebrew or if one is a Hebrew who has no slave, the law cannot be applied. You also need to note that the law applies only to a Hebrew slave indirectly because it protects his/her rights.

You need to know that this type of law constitutes the largest portion of the Old Testament's body of about 650 laws and also applies specifically to Israel's civil, religious and ethical life.

The Absolute Law

This is also called the apoditic law. This type is not common in the ancient law codes. It was more unique to Israel. This type of law expresses unconditional covenant demands. It was absolute and was stated in categorical language. This type is also paradigmatic, that is, it sets a standard by an example. In other words, it is not exhaustive, that is, it has not mentioned every possible case or circumstances when the law is to be applied.

3.4   Categories of the Old Testament Laws

Apart from the division of the law into two types, the laws have been variously classified into several categories. Though some scholars classify the law into three, namely moral, civil and ceremonial (Hays, 2001). However, the classification of Fee and Stuart (1993) would be adopted here.

Benevolence Laws

These are the laws that deal exclusively with the humane treatment of the poor and the helpless. They also deal with the issue of kindness towards animals. The following are examples of such laws:

a. This law states that animals were to be fed in proportion with the work they had done (Deuteronomy 25:4) and they were to observe the Sabbath law too (Exodus 20:8-11).
b. This law states that widows, orphans and foreigners were to be taken care of (Exodus 22:22-24); travellers were also granted the right to enter a farm and eat to their fill provided they take no extra out of the farm (Deuteronomy 23:24-25).
c. This law also states that servants were to be treated kindly (Leviticus 25:39-43) and that the freeborn could not be sold into slavery (Exodus 21:16).

Ceremonial Laws

These are the laws that guide the worship life of the individual and the nation as a whole they contain moistly the procedures governing the preservation of sacred objects. Examples of this type of law include:
a. The laws governing the ark of covenant and the rules concerning its movement (Exodus 25:10-22).
b. The laws governing the Levites and the rules they also had to keep in order to keep themselves pure for their service (Leviticus 10:8-11) as well as the laws regarding the priests.

Civil Laws

For the Israelites, obedience to God did not end in the religious life alone; it extended to their entire life. The civil laws are those that are concerned exclusively with the army, the court system and the political leadership. The followings are examples of civil laws:

a. The Army: though Israel was allowed to raise an army for her defence (Numbers 2:14-33), it was not to be a professional army. Men over 20 years of age are drafted into the army except Levites (Numbers 1:47-49); and to stop them from becoming greedy and professional warriors, they were not allowed to keep war horses (Deuteronomy 17:16) or spoils of war.
b. The Court System: Israel had a dual system of court, namely the civil and the religious. The Levites judged on religious matters

(Deuteronomy 17:8-13) and some elders are appointed judges on civil matters (2 Chronicles 19:8-11). The laws regarding witnesses and leniency are included in this category too.

   c. The Political Leadership: examples of this includes the barring of people with physical defects and those with mixed blood from taking leadership offices.

Criminal Laws

These laws cover several types of crimes like crimes against individuals, morality, property, religion and also against the society as a whole. For example, bearing false witness or false testimony is a crime against the individual as well as the society while worshipping of idols is a crime against God. Laws regarding sexual sanctity are also regarded as anti-society.

Dedication Laws

These cover the laws of dedication of every first born of every family (Exodus 4:22-23; Numbers 3:40-41; 8:18). These also include the laws governing tithing.

Dietary Laws

In demonstrating the uniqueness of the Israelites, God gave them laws on what to eat and what not to eat sometimes with reasons. These include abolition of improperly butchered meat (Leviticus 7:22-27); abolition of blood because it is life (Deuteronomy 12:23) and because it is a covering for sin (Leviticus 17:11) and abolition of animal fat, for it is offered to God alone (Leviticus 7:23).

Personal and Family Right Laws

The Bible closely guards the rights of the individual as well as those of their families. Children, for example, are expected to obey their parents and parents are to raise their children in the fear of the Lord. This law also covers the dignity of slaves as human beings. In fact, Exodus 21:20 classified those who dealt with their slaves to the point of death as murderers. Also included here is the family inheritance laws (Deuteronomy 21:15-17; 25:6). A daughter could inherit where there is no son but had to pay by marrying one from her own tribe so as to keep the property within the family (Numbers 27:7-8; 36:1-12)

Quarantine Laws

These are the health-related laws concerned with rule about death, illness, childbirth and a woman's menstrual period which could make persons unclean and unfit for worship. For example, anyone who touched a corpse could not go to the Temple until he/she become ritually clean (Leviticus 22:3-7).

Religious Obligation Laws

These are laws that state the responsibilities of the people to God. This is because all people owed their lives to Yahweh, and the community expected them to serve God and remain loyal to God's people. This includes the commandment to study, remember and teach the law (Deuteronomy 4:2; Numbers 15:37-41; Leviticus 18:4-5).

Religious Symbolism Laws

These are the laws concerned with the dressing of the Israelites to show their dedication to Yahweh. Jewish men wear phylacteries (Exodus 13:9; Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18) and tie them to their foreheads or left hands. They also wear blue fringes on their garments (Numbers 15:37-41; Deuteronomy 22:12).

Having finished with the classification of the laws we can now proceed to study the traditional interpretation of the laws before considering the right way to interpret these laws.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Cite five categories of the Old Testament laws and cite an example each.

3.5   Traditional Interpretation of the Old Testament Laws

Two major ways have been identified as traditional mode of interpreting the Old Testament laws and these are the allegorical and the typological. As you have studied in unit 2 of module one earlier, the allegorical interpretation was developed by the Greeks in the attempt to resolve the tension between their religious myth tradition and their philosophical heritage. Jews also who wished to remain true to the Mosaic tradition and also adopt Greek philosophy were faced with similar tension and some of

them also adopted the allegorical method. Philo of Alexandria was the most popular exponent of this method.

Allegorical interpretation takes the written word as covering for inner substance of truth that must be uncovered. Hence, it ends up treating biblical narratives like Greek myths. Though this is a principle based on profound reverence for the Bible, it is fraught with many disadvantages. Firstly, it disregards the common significance of words. For example, in Philo's interpretation of the rivers that flow through Eden, he said that the four rivers are virtues that are named as prudence, temperance, courage and justice. Secondly, by its very nature, allegorical interpretation gives rise to all manner of fanciful speculation because having disregarded the author's use of language, the interpreter is at freedom to force his own meaning on the text.

The second method is typological interpretation. The word 'typology' has its root in the Greek word '*typos*' which actually means 'pattern'. 'image', 'mark', 'model' and 'example'. Typology assumes that there is a fundamental correspondence between the Old and the New Testaments and it seeks to bring this to the surface. For example, it sees Adam in the Old Testament as a type of Christ of the New Testament. We must admit that typological interpretation is much more fitting than the allegorical interpretation because it is true to the nature of the Bible. However, typological interpretation also has its inadequacies. For Goldingay (1981), typological interpretation is not a systematic principle for interpreting the Old Testament because it is selective in the passages it uses and also selective in approach. Von Rad (1961) noted that the typological interpretation is inadequate because it would abandon the historical setting of the Old Testament and also abandon the archaeological as well as historical correspondences.

3.6   Steps in Interpreting the Old Testament Laws

Having gone through this entire preliminary maze, we can now come back to the original question: how do we interpret the Old Testament laws? The following are the steps to take in this regard:

Determine the Category of the Law

The very first thing to do is to determine the category the law falls into. This is to see if it is civil or ceremonial or benevolent or concerned with diet. Doing this would help you to know the raison dieter of the law and consequently its implications. Having done this you also need to determine

if the law is casuistic (conditional) or apoditic (absolute). This would help you to determine if the law is a general one that applies to everybody or a conditional law that applies only to a certain group of people under certain circumstances.

Determine if it is renewed in the New Testament

As Jesus sees himself as the fulfilment of the law, so are some of the laws of the Old Testament re-affirmed in the New Testament. A general guide to determine this is the fact that all the laws that concern love towards God and fellow neighbour are reaffirmed by Jesus. Re-affirmation of a law can be either explicit or implicit. Where such laws are explicitly re -affirmed as in the case of murder, adultery and vengeance (all of which are discussed in Matthew 5:21-22, 27-30 and 38-42 respectively) the parallel passage is to be noted.

If it is renewed, study the New Testament Parallel

You need to know that most of the Old Testament laws that are explicitly renewed by Jesus in the New Testament are usually modified. As a result, it is better to study the parallel passage because it may aid in discovering the motif behind the Old Testament laws itself. Let us cite the law on vengeance as an example:

Exodus 21:22-25 reads:

> And if a man struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she has a miscarriage, yet there is no further injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him; and he shall pay as the judge decide. But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty, life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

The parallel passage is in Matthew 5:38-41, and it reads:

> You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth". But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your

shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force
you to go one mile, go with him two.

A good interpreter will compare the two different contexts as this may shed light on the intention of the Old Testament law.

Whether the Law is renewed or not, Study the Law in its Context

What has been done mostly in interpreting the laws traditionally is to overlook the context of the law in the Old Testament and this is a grievous omission. As Hays (2001) rightly notes, "the Old Testament legal materials does not appear in isolation. Instead, the Mosaic Law is firmly embedded in Israel's theological history. It is an integral part of the story that runs from Genesis 12 through 2 Kings 25." Consequently, they must be interpreted within the context of that general and specific history. There are three sub-steps within this step as also suggested by Hays (2001).

Identify what the Law means to the Original Audience

To do this, you need to identify the historical and literary context of the law in question. You must note where they were in their journey when the law was given; you need to see if there are other laws within the context to which the law is related and finally pin on what it could have meant for the Israelites.

Determine the Differences between the Original Audience and the Contemporary Believer

To do this, you must delineate the situational and the theological differences between the contemporary audience and the contemporary Christian.

Develop Universal Principles form the Text

The final step is to develop from the text of the laws principles that can be said to be universal and thus would apply to the contemporary Christian. These principles should be developed in such a way that they should be reflected in the text; they should be timeless; they should correspond to the theology of the rest of the Bible; they should not be culturally bound and should be relevant to both old and new believers.

Apply the Principles

The final step is thus to develop the principles that has been delineated in such a way that it would apply to specific situation in the lives of the contemporary believers.

3.7   Practical Application

Let us try to apply the principles above to a passage of the Bible, Deuteronomy 22:1-4 which reads as follow:

> You shall not see your countryman's ox or his sheep straying away, and pay no attention to them; you shall certainly bring them back to your countryman. And if your countryman is not near you, or if you do not know him, then you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall remain with you until your countryman looks for it; then you shall restore it to him. And thus you shall do with his donkey, and you shall do the same with his garment, and you shall do likewise with anything lost by your countryman, which he has lost and you have found. You are not allowed to neglect them. You shall not see your countryman's donkey or his ox fallen down on the way, and pay no attention to them; you shall certainly help him to raise them up.

This law belongs to two classes. It can be classified as a civil law as well as a benevolence law in that it states the duty of one brother to another. It is also an apoditic law which deals with what one is expected to do. So, it is a law that is generally acceptable. Furthermore, like all apoditic laws, it is not exhaustive, in that it has just provided examples of an ox or sheep or donkey or garment. It covers the scope of anything that is lost in reality. This law is an example of one that is not explicitly stated in the New Testament. However by Jesus' statement that "you shall love your neighbour as yourself" it has been re-affirmed implicitly. Consequently, it has become binding that Christians should keep and observe this law. But because it has no parallel passage in the New Testament it is to be studied in its own context. The following are the issues that could be deduced in the study of this passage:
- Finding and keeping that which is lost from another is not allowed in Israel; it is same as stealing.

- Straying animals must be helped and restored to the owner and in cases where the owners are not known, they must be kept safe until the owners comes looking for them.
- The parallel passage in Exodus 23: 4-5 even states that if the straying animal needs help though rescuing the animal will cost time and effort, one must help the animal even if it will yield no gain. The principle can be succinctly put: be your brother's keeper.

Having got the principle, you must realize that the situation and the context of the Old Testament believers is different from that of the contemporary Christian. Thus, to us today, we would not be talking about oxen or donkeys but all Christians would equally be expected to care for their neighbour's properties. Finally, as Raymond Brown points out, as Israelites are urged not to be unconcerned about their brother's properties that are at risk:

> Believers (Christians) must not be indifferent to the grave problems which confront us in the modern society – alcoholism, drug abuse, abortion, homelessness, pornography, sexual deviance… it will be tragic if believers 'hide themselves' rather than become informed, pray for improved legislation… and take appropriate steps to bring about change.

Another thing to notice is that strained relationships are not to becloud expected duty. In other words, you must ensure that official and moral duty is not dictated by friendliness or enmity with the other party concerned.

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit you have examined the intricacies involved in the process of interpreting the Old Testament laws. You started from examining the complexities faced by the contemporary Christians in determine their relationship to the Old Testament laws. You also came to examine the types and the nature of the Old Testament laws as well as the process involved in the interpretation of the Old Testament laws

5.0   Summary

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- Our understanding of the law must begin from the understanding of its covenant nature.

- The law can be broadly classified into two classes: the conditional (casuistic) and the absolute (apoditic).
- The law can also be categorized according to their functions into ten categories.
- The two major traditional methods of interpreting the law is allegory and typology.
- In interpreting the law, it is important to study the law within its context.
- You also need to get the meaning of the law to the original recipients.
- Having arrived at the original meaning of the law, you can then apply it to the contemporary believer after a thorough assessment of the difference in the context of the Old and New Testament believers.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Discuss the steps involved in the interpretation of the Old Testament laws.

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UNIT 2:   Interpreting Prophetic Books

Content

1.0   Introduction

In the first unit of this module we have looked at how we can interpret the law. We have categorized and classified the laws into various classes and have explained step-by-step the stages of interpreting the law. In this module, we will move into the next chunk of literary genres in the Old Testament, the prophetic books. The prophetic books form one of the largely neglected genres of the Old Testament. Jaeggli (1997) has this to say about the contemporary attitude to the prophecies:

> Perhaps there is no category of Scripture that is more neglected in today's preaching than Old Testament prophecy. No doubt there are a few prophetic texts containing direct Messianic prediction that receive some attention. At Christmas, for instance, one might expect to hear a sermon on Isaiah 9:6–7. The vast majority of prophetic texts, however, have remained utterly ignored. The typical fundamental pastor may not preach from Old Testament prophecy in any expository manner for years. This situation is probably due to a sense of frustration that many expositors experience as they study a prophetic passage. The message seems on the surface far removed from today.

By the end of this unit you would have become more exposed to the handling of the prophecies if the Old Testament.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Identify who is a prophet.
- Explain what prophecy is from the Jewish perspective
- Discuss the nature and forms of prophecies
- Divide the prophetic literature to its different epochs
- Discuss the methodology involved in interpreting Old Testament prophecies.

3.0   Main Content

3.1   Introducing the Prophetic Ministry/Books

The prophetic books form the second division of Hebrew canon and the largest number of books of the Hebrew Scripture is classified under this category and they are sixteen in all. Before going on to consider the interpretation of prophecies, we need to begin from the very beginning by defining the prophet. The Hebrew word that has been consistently translated prophet is *navi*. This word has been variously treated etymologically but the most acceptable suggestion was that by Albright (1957) who traced the word to the Akkadian root '*nabu*' and suggested that the meaning would have been 'to call'. Albright then argues that *navi* should be taken in the passive sense and thus the prophet would mean 'one called of God'.

It is in the same vein that Harrison (1969) defined the prophet as someone who has experienced a divine call and was fundamentally an independent religious and charismatic figure. It has to be ascertained that the office of the prophet is not hereditary neither could it be appropriated by virtue of political appointment. Closely related to the concept of the *navi* are two other Hebrew words: the *ro'eh* and the *hozeh*. *Ro'eh* is an active participle of the verb to see, thus it is generally translated "seer" while the *hozeh* though is another active participle of the verb 'to see' is not commonly used. *Hozeh* is usually translated 'prophet' too.

3.2   Classification of the Prophetic Era

Pratt (2008) is of the opinion that the misunderstanding of the prophetic books stems largely from the inability to organize the books into an orderly

whole. To be able to combat this he proposed a five-stage period of the prophets which would also be adopted here:

The Early Monarchy

The first period of the prophets is the period of the early monarchy. Unlike Pratt (2008) that picked the early monarchy from David, I would say that the period began from Saul because though Samuel was a judge, he was also a sort of prophet and actually laid the background for the coming prophets. In fact, what could have been termed as the first school of prophets started under the leadership of Samuel. It was however during the time of David and Solomon that the golden age of prophecy was reached.

It is however unfortunate that we have no directly written records of the activities of the prophets of the monarchy because they were not writing prophets. The prophets that we have records of what they have done were those mentioned in passing during the history of the house of Israel. These include Samuel, Nathan and Gad. This notwithstanding, these prophets laid the foundation for the prophetic ministry in Israel. In all these periods however, you need to note that the prophets were concerned about the house of Israel and the ideal state of Israel whether in monarchy or theocracy. They served as guides and counsellors to the kings and the people.

The Period of Assyrian Domination

The second period of prophetic ministry was the period of the Assyrian judgement. At this time, God decided to use the nation of Assyria to punish Israel because of her sins. This was the period of the ministry of Jonah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Nahum and Isaiah. It is very evident that the Assyrian concern was the focus of the ministry of these prophets as the oracles that were recorded for them clearly points to the Assyrian nation.

The important events of this period that formed the theme of the prophecies were the Syro-Israelite coalition. This was the alliance formed by the Israelites (the Northern Kingdom) with Syria with the bid of rebelling against the Assyrians. Though they tried to force Judah to join the alliance, Judah refused. This alliance was interpreted by the prophets as a loss of faith in Yahweh on the part of Israel. Later in 722 BC, the Assyrians destroyed Samaria. The second theme was the attack of Assyria on Judah in the days of Hezekiah. Hezekiah looked up for help from the Lord and though the Assyrians came to the gates of Jerusalem, the Assyrians departed without firing a single shot because the Lord confounded them.

The third theme was that of hope. The prophets spoke of the eventual fall of Jerusalem but also of the restoration that would follow.

The Period of Babylonian Domination

The next stage in Israelites prophecy was that of Babylonian judgement. In this period, prophecy mostly was centred on Babylonian attack on Jerusalem. The prophets that prophesied about the Babylonian attack include: Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Joel, Obadiah, Habakkuk, Ezekiel and Daniel. The Babylonian attack came in three phases: the first phase was in 605 BC when they took only a bunch of people (the nobles) away; the second phase was in 597 BC when they took another set of people and the third and final phase was in 586 BC when the city was utterly destroyed. As with the first phase Assyrian phase of prophecy there was also the theme of restoration in the prophecies.

Most of the prophets, especially, Jeremiah, spent a larger part of his oracles convincing the people that they would stay for a very long time in Babylon and urged them to prepare themselves for it instead of holding on to the popular belief that Jerusalem is invincible and they would return very soon.

The Period of Restoration

The period of restoration from exile formed the next stage for prophecy in Israel. This period covered the years from 539 BC to 400 BC. After some years, the Persian Empire rose up and sacked the Babylonian empire. It was through the edict of Dairus that the exiles were allowed to return to Jerusalem and even given the permission to rebuild not only the walls but also the Temple.

The first set of Jews returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel. The excitement greeting the return died down pretty soon and this led to the prophetic ministry of Haggai who encouraged the people to return to the building of the Temple. By hundred years of their return, a new problem set in: they had started intermarrying with foreign women and also were beginning to participate in other religions. This led to the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah. Other prophets of this era were Zechariah and Malachi. By this time however, the Messianic prophecies were already making rounds since it was the Messiah that can reform the people absolutely.

The Intertestamental Period

The period between the Old and the New Testament is commonly referred to as the Intertestamental period. This was a period of darkness also called the silent years (400 years) when there seemed to be no message from God. This period however marked the religious development among the Jews. It was the period when the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Zealots also cut a clout for themselves. It was at this period that solitary prophets like John the Baptist rose with the messianic expectation and the scene became pregnant with expectation for the Messiah.

Self-Assessment Exercise

In one sentence describe what characterizes prophecy in each stage of its development.

3.3   The Nature of Prophecy/Prophetic Books

That the Old Testament meaning of prophecy is largely misunderstood today is seen in most dictionary meaning of the term. Prophecy today is generally defined as foretelling and prediction of what is to come. However, unless we see most prophets as concerned with their own immediate future rather than our own future we are bound to misinterpret the prophetic books. If you have followed the section above on the various period of the prophetic ministry in Israel, you would have discovered that most of the prophets were indeed concerned with Israel and not the contemporary world.

The prophets should be seen first and foremost as spokesmen for God to their generations rather than as futurologists. This is why in the prophetic books we hear from God via the prophets and very little about the prophets themselves. Again, as a result of the oral nature of the prophecies, the longer prophetic books are usually collections of spoken oracles that are not always presented in their original chronological sequence and often taken away from their historical context. This is what makes the interpretation of prophecies enigmatic.

An indicated earlier, the prophetic books were not arranged chronological as the oracles were delivered by the prophet. They were oracles that were put together by the editors of the books. The individual nature of the oracles thus makes it compulsory for anyone who wishes to interpret the prophetic utterances to analyze the individual oracles. Three forms of prophetic

oracles could be identified, namely the lawsuits, the woes and the salvation oracles.

The Lawsuits

In this type of oracle, God is pictured as a plaintiff or a judge or a bailiff in a court case against Israel, the defendant. An example of the lawsuit could be found in Isaiah 3:13-26. The elements of this oracle can be tabulated as follows:

Verses	Element
13-14a	The court convenes and charges are brought against Israel.
14b-16	The indictment or accusation is spoken
17-26	Judgement is pronounced and Israel is found guilty.

This dramatic presentation of the prophet's message helps in the reinforcement of the message.

The Woes

The woe is understood as an indication of disaster and it usually contains three basic elements: the announcement of distress, the reason for the distress and the prediction of doom. A good example of the woe is Micah 2:1-5 and it also contains the three elements indicated above.

Verses	Element
2:1a	The announcement of woe
2:1b-2	The reason for the woe
2:3-5	The prediction of doom

The Promise or Salvation Oracle

This is one form of oracle that can be identified easily. It also contains three elements. A good example of this form could be found in Amos 9:11-15:

Verses	Element
9:11a	This verse indicates the future by the phrase "in that day"
9:11b-13	This is an indication of the radical changes
9:14-15	This is an indication of the blessing involved

What are the forms of prophetic oracles?

3.4   Steps in Interpreting Prophecies

In a sense, there is no major difference in the hermeneutical process involved in the prophetic books and the other biblical genres though one must confess there are some special considerations. The following are the steps that are expected to be used:

Historical-Cultural Analysis

Since no book ever was written in a vacuum, the prophetic books were written within specific historical and cultural context. The first step in interpreting the prophetic books then is to uncover the historical and cultural issues surrounding the text to be interpreted. Let me cite an example here from Isaiah 6. Most people have always taken the vision recorded in this chapter as the call of Isaiah and have often used this to justify the belief that the fact that someone is minister does not mean that he is saved. However, the very first verse in this chapter is the key to understanding not only the passage but also the implications of the vision of Isaiah. For the larger part of his reign, Uzziah was very good and he brought Judah very close to the golden age as experienced in the days of King David. His death must have been a big blow to Isaiah and he was at the Temple to mourn the loss of Uzziah. The vision he saw therefore of the LORD seated upon his throne must have been that saying to him that though an earthly king may died, the actual king of Judah, the Lord of Lords cannot die and he reigns forever. With this perspective in mind, the vision would be well placed and the vision would no longer be seen as the first commissioning of Isaiah for the ministry work.

Another good example is that of the book of Jonah. Many people after reading the book usually condemn Jonah for refusing to go to Nineveh and for his attitude to Nineveh throughout the book. However, as at that time, Israel, Jonah's home-country was already a vassal to Tiglath- Pileser who had founded the second Assyrian empire and Judah too was also paying tributary to Assyria. Jonah, a patriotic Israelite, would have reckoned that if Nineveh (at that time the capital of Assyria) did not repent, God would have had no choice but to let Nineveh face the music of disobedience, which would have been its destruction. Being a loyal and patriotic Israelite, Jonah would have preferred the destruction of Assyria, hence the most natural thong for him to have done is to have prevented the message of

Yahweh from getting to Nineveh, hence his decision to run away. This sentiment is later echoed in Jonah's dialogue with Yahweh towards the end of the book.

> And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, *was* not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou *art* a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil (Jonah 4:2).

This historical background would give the interpreter the strong footing needed to arrive at a correct meaning of the passage.

Contextual Analysis

After having determined the historical-cultural situation for the book of prophecy the next step is the determination of the context. Jaeggli (1997) identified four different strata of context and these are analyzed as follows:

> There are various levels of context: the immediate context within a paragraph, the relation of paragraphs within a periscope, the development of pericopes in a section, and the macroscopic contribution of sections in the overall message of a book.

This analysis is very crucial to the understanding of the original message of the prophecies to the original hearers. Let us take the book of Amos as an example. Amos lived and prophesized during the reigns of Uzziah, king of Judah and Jeroboam II of Samaria. These two reigned concurrently for 36 years (779BC-743BC). The book may have been written about the middle of Jeroboam's reign. During this time, because Assyria has defeated Syria, he gave Jeroboam II the chance to extend his frontiers and to build a lucrative trade which led to the creation of a powerful merchant class. This led consequently to the neglect of the peasant class. As a result, the poor was oppressed (2:6f), justice went to the highest bidder (2:6; 8:6) and the poor had to go to the money lender to mortgage his land. The economy also takes its toll on religion. Religion was perverted. Though sacrificial system was maintained, it went on with godlessness and immorality. Knowing these facts will make the interpreter of the book of Amos stand at a vantage point.

Lexical/Syntactical Analysis

As have seen said earlier, the Bible had been written in the language of humanity and so must be subjected to the principles of the rules of human language. This is also reiterated by Jaeggli (1997):

> The Bible is more than mere literature, but it is literature. God did not invent new forms of communication when he gave man his word. The Bible must be interpreted in a straightforward manner according to rules that govern the meaning of any human literature.

Accordingly, the third step in interpreting biblical prophecy is lexical and syntactical analysis. Lexical analysis does not only give us the meaning intended by the author but also help to resolve conflicts. Let us take as an example the use of the term 'virgin' by Prophet Isaiah to describe the mother of the Messiah. This word has caused a controversy by some who think it does not refer to a virgin. In his analysis of the term, Niessen argued that the Hebrew word *almah* was used nine times in the Old Testament. The word was used to describe Rebecca who was described in Genesis 24:16 as "the girl was very beautiful, a virgin, and no man had had relations with her; and she went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up." The analysis of the word shows that the *almah* was definitely in the Hebrew concept a young woman of a marriageable age whose virginity is not in doubt.

Literary Analysis

In the interpretation of prophecy, there is no way we can overlook the use of literary figures and this is what makes literary analysis an important step in the process of interpretation. This is because all prophetic books contain a substantial amount of poetry and several prophetic books are exclusively poetic. Therefore, there is the need to determine whether the prophet has used his words figuratively or literally. Berkhof (1950) opines that "the words of the prophet should be taken in their usual literal sense, unless the context or the manner in which they are fulfilled clearly indicate that they have a symbolical meaning.

Principilization and Application

After you have taken all the steps described above, the next step is to draw out the general principles and apply the principle to the contemporary day. Kaiser describes principilization as the ability "to state the author's

propositions, arguments, narrations and illustrations in timeless abiding truths with special focus on the applications of those truths to the current needs of the church."

3.5   Practical Application – Amos 2:6-8

Thus says the LORD,
For three transgressions of
     Israel and for four
I will not revoke its punishment,
Because they sell the righteous
     for money
And the needy for a pair of sandals

These who pant after the very
     dust of the earth on the
     head of the helpless
Also turn aside the way of the
     humble;
and a man and his father
     resort to the same girl
in order to profane My holy name.

On garments taken as pledges
     they stretch out beside
     every altar,
And in the house of their God
     they drink the wine of
     those who have been fined.

From the analysis above, you would notice that the historical-cultural context has been given as an example. The next one is the immediate context. This oracle is surrounded by the oracles of judgement delivered on the neighbours of Israel and Judah for various crimes. In the periscope immediately preceding the oracle against Judah was given and form verse 6, the prophet began delivering the oracle against Israel-Samaria. This becomes intriguing if we know that Amos was a prophet who hailed from Judah. Hence delivering an oracle against Israel in Samaria was a courageous act considering the political and religious rivalry between Judah and Israel.

Now we can move on to lexical-syntactical analysis. The arrangement of the periscope shows clearly that it is poetic and thus there would also be the

need for literary analysis. The first two lines of the oracle for example are clearly not literal. This is because if you count the number of the offences listed, it is more than either three or four that is listed. This is a figure speech based on Jewish numerology. In this numerology, three means enough as is true also of the Yoruba people. There is a Yoruba proverb that says "*ekini kebe, ekeji kebe, eleketa lajenjetan*" which means if you commit any offence twice you would be forgiven but the third would not be forgiven. Thus the lines "For three transgression of Israel and for four" simply mean that the transgressions of Israel have over-flown its limit and thus God does not have a choice but to execute judgement. The remaining verses contain the crime of Israel:

The people of Israel are accused of esteeming the most vile bribes more that the lives of human beings. The pair of sandal is the most priceless article that anyone could have, so to exchange a human live or dignity for this shows the level of depravity.

In verse seven, they were accused of incest which goes against the laws of the covenant thereby ridiculing the Lord's name. Verse eight begins with the statement "on garments taken as pledges they stretch out beside every altar" which is a reference to the participation of the Israelites in cultic prostitution, one of the very abominations for which the Canaanites were driven out of the land that was given to them by God.

In conclusion therefore, God has declared that for the numerous sins as well as the depth of the depravity of the Israelites, He can no longer afford to look the other way. Israel has to be punished.

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit you have learnt that the prophetic literature that has the largest number of books in the Old Testament is classified into the second division of the Hebrew canon. You have also learnt that a prophet is a spokesman who has been called to service by God. You should also know by now that the history of prophetic declaration in Israel can be classified into five: the early monarchy, the period of Assyrian domination, the period of Babylonian domination, the restoration and the inter-testamental period. You have also been taught that the biblical concept of prophecy is largely misunderstood today as the prophets were not futurologists as usually thought but were spokesmen for God. The forms of prophetic genres include the lawsuits, the woes and the promise/salvation oracles. You must have also seen that the historical context out of which a prophecy was issued is germane to its interpretation.

5.0   Summary

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- The Hebrew word for prophet is *navi* which means 'one called by God'.
- The history of prophecy can be divided into five stages, namely: the early monarchy, the period of Assyrian domination, the period of Babylonian domination, the restoration and the inter-testamental period.
- Prophets should be seen first and foremost as spokesmen for God rather than as futurologists.
- The forms of the prophetic genres are: the lawsuits, the woes and the promise/salvation oracles.

Self-Assessment Exercise

1.   Discuss the role of prophecy in Israel at each stage of the development of the history of prophecy.
2.   What are the steps to take in interpreting prophetic literature?

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UNIT 3:   Interpreting Historical Narratives

Content

1.0   Introduction

In the previous unit you have studied the interpretation of prophetic oracles and books. You have learnt about the nature of the prophecies and their elements and the various steps to take in interpreting them. In this unit, you would be learning the interpretation of historical narratives which are the commonest form of genre in the Old Testament. The historical narratives are more in the Old Testament than any other type as they are present in other genres like prophetic books. Though they look simple, by the time you go through the studies in this unit you would know that it is not easy to tackle them. However, you will discover many interesting elements about the narratives.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

* Identify historical narratives within the Old Testament
* Identify the literary qualities of the historical narratives
* Explain the nature of historical narratives
* Discuss the principles involved in interpreting the historical narratives

3.0   Main Content

3.1   Introducing Historical Narratives

Historical narratives are orderly description of events. As you have been told earlier, mush of the Old Testament is written in historical narratives. Bratcher (2006) declares that "About 40% of the biblical material is narrative, story, and is the most common single type of writing in the Bible." At times these accounts concerns individuals or nations (Morrow, 2008). In fact, Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Jonah and Haggai consists mostly of historical narratives. Adam (2000) also defines historical narratives as true stories with a set of characters and a single plot.

The preponderance of historical narratives and the seeming simplicity of their nature make people to think that they are just easy to understand and interpret. This however is not so because the simple face of the historical narratives beguiles the complexity of their interpretation. Therefore, before we actually go into the process of interpreting the historical narratives, you need to determine the nature of the so-called narratives and their functions at the various levels of the narratives.

3.2   Nature of Historical Narratives

The first question to ask about the historical narratives is: how historical are the historical narratives? The 20_{th} century people cannot afford to see these historical narratives as they would have seen the contemporary 20th century history. In other words, the historical narratives are not just records of historical events; they are historical events that have been interpreted from the religious eyes. Let us cite one simple example: after Assyria had lost two battles against the Babylonian coalition in 612 and 610 BC, the final battle took place at Carchemish in 606 BC. Pharaoh Necho who wanted to aid Assyria was delayed by Josiah at Megiddo (2 Chronicles 35:20) and Riblah. Therefore he arrived Carchemish too late; Nebuchadnezzar had already defeated the Assyrians and had decided to turn on Egypt. Thus Babylon became the super power. However, as far as the prophets of Israel were concerned, Babylon's rise to power was because God had ordained Babylon as a means of punishment to Judah. This is how Jeremiah described the story:

> For thus says the Lord, "Behold, I am going to make you a
> terror to yourself and to all your friends; and while your eyes

look on, they will fall by the sword of their enemies. So, I
shall give over all Judah to the king of Babylon, and he will
carry them away as exiles to Babylon and will slay them with
the sword (Jeremiah 20:4)

This prophetic declaration from Jeremiah can be compared with the
redacted thoughts of Nebuchadnezzar as we have it from the pen of Daniel:
"Is this not Babylon the Great, which I myself have built as a royal
residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?" So,
the narratives we have in the Bible are to be seen as historical events that
have been interpreted from religious perspective.

The second thing to notice about the historical narratives is their literary
quality. All the narratives have characters and plots and the plots are parts
of a special overall plot that is played out by a lot of characters while the
chief character is God himself.

3.3   Levels of Historical Narratives

As you would have noticed above, the narratives are told on different
levels. These levels Fee and Stuart (1993) identified as the bottom, the
middle and the top level narratives and these would be discussed in this sub
section.

The Bottom Level

This is level in which we have locked up several hundreds of individual
stories. Examples of this level include the story of David: his victory over
Goliath, his struggle with King Saul, his friendship with Jonathan, his
ascension to the throne, his relationship with Bathsheba and all the
narratives concerning David. Adam (2008) notes that each individual
narrative contributes to the overall plan of God and as such interpreters
should always take note of the narrative with its role in the overall plan of
God.

The Middle Level

This level centres on Israel as a nation and its role in the redemptive
history. It includes the call of Abraham, the patriarchal history, the
enslavement in Egypt, the Exodus, settlement in Canaan up to the exile and
the restoration from the exile.

The Top Level

These are the narratives concerning the universal plan of God as it is played out through the created world. Major narratives here include the creation, the fall of humanity, Christ's incarnation and redemptive ministry. This level is also called the redemptive history.

You should note however that the narratives on the bottom level form an integral part of the narratives on the middle level which are in turn integral parts of the top level narratives. This understanding is important for a proper interpretation of the historical narratives.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Identify the levels of narrative and cite an example of each.

3.4   Characteristics of Historical Narratives

As a result of the many misunderstandings of some of the narratives, it is important to state what the narratives are not and highlight certain tendencies which people have towards the narratives in the bid to interpret. You should therefore notice the following:

The Narratives are not just Stories

The narratives are not just stories about people who lived in the ancient period. The danger of seeing the narratives in this light is that the Old Testament would then be a mere collection of Jewish myths and legends with no applicable message to the contemporary world. it will be nothing more than the collection of the stories of the tribal heroes of our own people. These narratives are to be seen therefore as stories about what God did to and through the people concerned in the stories. It is God's own story of His dealings with His people, thus behind the narratives God is the leading decisive character.

The Narratives are not Allegories

The narratives are not allegories. Many interpreters and preachers treat most of the narratives as allegories. The narratives are seen as stories that are full of hidden meanings and in the bid to bring out the so called hidden meanings, the narratives are misinterpreted. For example, some people understood the narrative of Esther as a spiritual allegory in which Hamaan is seen as the devil who seeks to destroy the Christians though the Jews are

the real characters in the story. Despite the fancifulness of such readings, they are misinterpretations. The Esther narrative should be seen simply as the story of how the Lord used Esther to save the Jews as Susa from death.

The Narratives are not Designed to Answer Every Question

The narratives are not designed to answer every question on any and every issue and as such must not be forced to do so. You have to see the stories as they are: limited in their focus and you have to be contended with their limited approach. Mostly, these stories are concerned with telling us what God has done and not why he did it or how he did it. Many interpreters today are now seeing the book of Genesis (the creation account to be specific) as one that can be made amenable to fit in to the scientific evolutionary theory. This is out of focus of the Bible account that just wanted us to know that God created the world.

On the other extreme, there are those who want to maintain that the world is only between 4,000 and 6,000 years old just to oppose the scientific theory of evolution that puts the world at billions of years old. They are also wrong because at many points, we are not told in the Bible how long it took God to do certain things. For example, we are not told the age of the first creation that was destroyed by flood. In fact, there are many questions you would be faced with it you are to treat the narratives as if they give all the necessary details. Therefore, the interpreter must learn to be content with whatsoever information the narrative gives and be honest to accept that the narratives did not give some information no matter how important the information not given are.

The Narratives are not directly didactic

These narratives are used mostly to illustrate what has been taught either implicitly or explicitly elsewhere. Let us take the narrative of David and Bathsheba of 2 Samuel 11 as an example. Nowhere in this narrative is anyone told that adultery is a sin and that David did what was wrong. In fact, people may even think that allowing Solomon to reign after David is sanctioning act. However, the narrative illustrates the evil the act has done to David's personal, political and domestic life. This narrative cannot be used on its own to teach that adultery is wrong but can be used as an illustration of what adultery can do in a families, governmental policies and even personal lives.

Some Narratives are Dependent

This is to say that some individual narratives cannot on their own function in any way. They have no moral teachings on their own. Oftentimes, some individual stories are integral part of a major narrative so that they both work together to give the readers a good message. Let us take the conflict between the herdsmen of Abraham and those of Lot as an example. This narrative on its own does not really have anything to teach but it is functioning as a unit within the larger Abraham narrative.

Self-Assessment Exercise

What are the characteristics of historical narratives?

3.5   Elements of Historical Narratives

Every narrative, whether biblical or not have three basic elements and these are important in hearing and interpreting the narrative. These elements would be discussed here briefly.

Setting

The setting of a narrative according to Bratcher (2006) involves physical, cultural and temporal dimensions which must be considered in relation and interaction with the characters and the plot. In one word, the setting is actually the historical context and as you have been taught earlier, the historical context must be studied in the bid to interpret the Bible. You need to note that the physical setting includes specific places and objects; the cultural includes customs, social values, belief system, world view and attitude; and temporal setting include the political dimension which is either local or international.

Plot and Characters

The plot cannot be discussed in isolation but along with the characters. Bratcher (2006) also said that the character must be studied alongside the plot, the tension and the flow and arrangement of the story. The plot is important because it is directly related to the message of the narrative.

The Literary Context

As you have learnt before, each of these stories are parts of a larger story. Consequently, the larger story forms the literary context of each of these

narratives. It is thus an additional setting to note if the narrative is to be interpreted properly.

3.6 Steps in Interpreting Historical Narratives

Having studied the characteristics and the elements of the historical narratives, we can now move on to the processes involved in interpretation.

Identify the Level of the Narrative

As discussed earlier, every narrative has a level (bottom, middle and top) and this has to be determined before proceeding on interpretation. If a narrative is on the bottom level, its interpretation has to be seen along its role in the middle level and the top level narrative as well. Any interpreter that closes his/her eyes to this truth is bound to misunderstand the meaning of the narratives.

Establish the Dependency of the Narrative

As discussed earlier too, some narratives are dependent on other narratives. If the narrative you are going to interpret falls into this category you need to establish all other narratives that functions along with the narrative. Inability to do this will be tantamount to taking the narrative out of its context and thus opening the way for misinterpretation.

Identify the Characters

While bearing in your mind that God is the supreme character you have to identify all the major characters in the narrative. This will help you to determine the role of each character in the narrative and the goal towards which the narrative is moving. This is the literary approach to the understanding of the narratives.

Unravel the Historical Setting

Some narratives are so historically bound that their messages cannot be totally comprehended unless the historical circumstances surrounding the narratives are brought to bear on the narratives. For example, in one of the numerous bottom level narratives that made up the Moses' narratives we have the statement: "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." You have to deal with the problem that this statement generates. Is it really possible for a king to come to Egypt's throne and not know Joseph? What about the palace records of his deeds? However, if you

understand the history of the development of Egypt's politics, you would be in a better position to understand the statement. Joseph was accepted in Egypt because the rulers of Egypt then were of the Hyksos tribe (the Hyksos were also Semites like the Israelites). However, at the time of Israel's oppression, "the Hyksos rulers under whom Semites like Joseph had been given prominent positions had been driven from the land" (Flanders, Crapps and Smith, 1972). This shift of power from the foreign Semitic people to the indigenes which formed the 18th dynasty occasioned the reign of terror since Israel would also be regarded as a foreign nation. Thus to say that a new king arose that did not know Joseph did not mean a mental recognition but a deliberate decision not to acknowledge the person of Joseph.

Identify the Narratives' Teaching Method

As had been discussed earlier, historical narratives teach either implicitly or explicitly. It is good for the interpreter to determine which method the narrative he/she is interpreting adopts so that he/she will know what to expect.

Identify Theological Key Points

It has been mentioned earlier that though historical narratives are not compendia of theology, yet they illustrate theology. Therefore, it would be necessary to identify the theological key points to which the historical narratives serve as illustration.

Identify the Messages

Finally you can now pool together all the messages in the narratives that are taught either implicitly or explicitly and the theological key points that are illustrated. This however would be done by locating the narrative's role in the top-level narrative.

3.7   Practical Application: The Jonah Narrative

The Jonah narrative is one of they best known narratives in the world today. There are in fact many literary references among Jews, Moslems, Christians and even in secular literature. From this narrative, we are told that Jonah the son of Amittai is the key character. As a result, it has been thought of as a reference to the Jonah mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25.

Beginning with the first step, the Jonah narrative should be seen as a bottom level narrative because it is an individual level narrative but it is actually functioning on the top level which concerns God's universal plan of redemption for mankind. Within the Jonah narratives itself, there are about four dependent narratives that are closely knitted together to from the main narrative. In other words, the single Jonah has some functioning sub-plots that are not of relevance on their own but makes the main plot meaningful. An example is the narrative of Jonah and the sailors during the storm. This is also one of the narratives where God is actively involved as a major character. Jonah is the main human character as the antagonist of the narrative (note that God is the protagonist). Other characters are the sailors and their captain and also the people of Nineveh. In this narrative also, there are other creatures, that is, non-human characters that played prominent roles. They are also to be identified because they play major roles in the unfolding message of the narratives. These are the wind, the big fish, the plant, the scorching east wind and the storm. Later in the interpretation, you would see the significance of these non-human characters.

The Jonah narrative is one of the historical bound narratives in the Bible, so you need to settle the historical settings before proceeding on the interpretation. The historical matters concern Nineveh – the place where Jonah was sent by God. Therefore, there is the need to determine what Nineveh was and the relationship between Nineveh and Israel, where Jonah's ministry took place. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria before the conflict with the Babylonian coalition. By the death of Jeroboam II, the greatest founder of the Assyrians came to the throne. He was none other than Tiglath- Pileser also called Pul. He was the first Assyrian king to obtain tribute from Israel. So, politically, Israel was a vassal state to Assyria to which Nineveh was capital. It is against this background that the reluctance of Jonah to embark on this mission could be understood.

It is necessary to give a summary of the Jonah narrative. The narrative opens with God's call to Jonah to go and minister at Nineveh. Jonah on the contrary went down to Joppa and sailed off to Tarshish. On the way to Tarshish, the Lord sent a storm and the ship he was in came under distress. On casting lots, the sailors discovered that it was on Jonah's account that the evil befell them. When they could no longer save Jonah's life, he was thrown into the sea and the Lord sent a big fish to swallow him. The narrative revealed to us that Jonah prayed in the belly of the fish and the fish took him to the shores of Nineveh. Again, the Lord called Jonah to go and minister at Nineveh and he obeyed this time around. However, after delivering the message, Jonah left the city expecting the Lord to destroy the

city. However, the Lord did not because the people repented. Jonah felt bad and the Lord used a plant to teach him that he had no cause to be angry.

Going through this narrative, there is no explicit teaching except that the Lord is not interested in the destruction of any sinner no matter who the sinner might be (Jew or Gentile) and so, His salvation is unlike the Jewish narrow- mindedness and parochialism. However, there are many implicit lessons to be derived and many theological key points that are illustrated. The following are to be noted:

1. God is the Universal God: the first major lesson we see is that God is not just the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as the Jews like to parrot in their bid to glory in their covenant relationship with the Lord. As Glaze (1972) states, "the book of Jonah exposes the narrow nationalism (of Jews) and shows the universal redemptive design of God for all mankind." We are shown by God's decision to send Jonah to Nineveh that God is concerned for the redemption of non-Jews as He is for the Jews. It is His desire that they be given a chance to hear God's words before they are destroyed.

2. God is Gracious, Patient and Abounding in Loving Kindness: this quality of God was clearly stated by Jonah in Chapter 4:2b:

> For I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful,
> slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and
> repentest of evil.

This quality is shown more explicitly through God's decision to spare Nineveh on their repentance and also in sparing Jonah's life after hiss bid to escape to Tarshish.

3. God is Omnipotent: God's omnipotence is seen in the way He has controlled everything in the Jonah narrative. When Jonah was running away, He appointed a wind to raise a storm on the sea. When Jonah was thrown into the sea, He appointed a big fish to swallow him. When Jonah was scorched by the east wind and the sun, He appointed a plant to give him shade and later a worm to kill the plant. In fact, it is clear in the narrative that God is omnipotent and as such the Lord of history and all creation.

4. God is Omnipresent: this is also illustrated by God as He spoke to Jonah both at Israel and at Nineveh. This also buttresses the claim that contrary to Jewish belief that God dwells in Jerusalem, God is everywhere!

5. The finite man cannot escape God's presence: as the Psalmist exclaimed, "Wither can I flee from thy presence," the Jonah

narrative makes it clear that even at the innermost past of the ship where Jonah had hidden himself, God knew he was there. Thus, it is futile for human beings to attempt running away from God's presence.

6. All men are capable of responding to God: contrary to the teachings of some people that it is impossible for the sinful human being to respond to God, the Jonah narrative shows that it is possible. When the sinful inhabitants of Nineveh heard about God's warning, they all repented and fasted and prayed.

7. There is an irrevocable missionary responsibility for the people of God. All God's children are expected to carry forth the gospel of the Lord to those who have not got the grace of hearing and or responding to the gospel message. According to the Bible, we are saved to serve.

8. There is a wide gap between God's value and human value. Though Jonah was a prophet of God, his values are still not God's values. He was not able to rise above the Jewish narrow mindedness and parochialism while God could see in the Ninevites, men and women made in His image.

Finally, in some of the sub-plots in the narratives, we could see their importance within the major narrative. Example, the sailors' episode is used to show Jonah's callousness. While Jonah was not ready to go and preach at Nineveh because he wants Nineveh destroyed, the sailors risked their own lives by trying to row to safety so that they would not have to throw Jonah into the sea.

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit, you have learnt about interpreting historical narratives. You have been taught that historical narratives which takes about 40% of the whole biblical material is an orderly description of events though biblical narratives have been interpreted from the religious perspectives. By now you should also know that historical narratives has the bottom, middle and top levels with each narrative interacting together to from a holistic message. In interpreting the narratives, it should be known that they are not mere stories or allegories and neither are they designed to answer every question or are they directly didactic. Every narrative has a setting, characters, plot and literary context all of which are important to decipher in the process of interpretation.

5.0   Summary

The following are the main points you have learnt in this unit:

- Historical narratives are true stories with a set of characters and a single plot.
- Biblical narratives are usually interpreted from the religious perspective.
- Historical narratives can be classified into three levels: the bottom, middle and the top levels.
- The historical narratives are not just mere stories.
- The historical narratives are not allegories
- The historical narratives are not designed to answer every question
- The historical narratives are not all directly didactic
- Some narratives are dependent and other are independent.
- The narratives have a setting, characters, plot and literary context.

Self-Assessment Exercise

1. Using appropriate examples, discuss the elements of historical narratives

2. Discuss the steps to take in interpreting historical narratives.

6.0   References/Further Readings

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UNIT 4:   Interpreting Wisdom Literature

CONTENT

1.0   Introduction
2.0   Intended Learning Objectives
3.0   Main Content
    3.1   Introducing the Wisdom Literature
    3.2   Levels of Wisdom
    3.3   Basic Wisdom Genres
    3.4   Categories of Wisdom
    3.5   Literary Forms in Wisdom Literature
    3.6   Traditional Understanding of Wisdom Books
    3.7   Steps in Interpreting Wisdom Books
    3.8   Practical Application
4.0   Conclusion
5.0   Summary
6.0   References/Further Readings

1.0   Introduction

In the previous unit you have studied the interpretation of historical narratives which forms a good portion of the Old Testament. In this unit you would be looking at another special genre of biblical literature, the wisdom literature. Wisdom literature is a genre that is common in the Ancient Near East and the oral cultures of Africa which are intended to teach the people how best to live their lives. You would look at the role of wisdom literature among the Jews, the nature of wisdom literature as well as the different categories of wisdom. Your understanding of all these is necessary for good interpretation of wisdom literature.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Identify the levels of wisdom literature among the Jews
- List all the various genres of wisdom
- Define the various categories of wisdom literature
- Discuss the various literary forms in wisdom literature
- Evaluate the traditional understanding of wisdom books
- Discuss the steps to take in interpreting a wisdom piece

3.0   Main Content

3.1   Introducing the Wisdom Literature

Wisdom literature comprises books like Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs as far as the Old Testament canon is concerned. Recent scholarship however includes some Psalms, Joseph narratives (Genesis 37-50) and some portions of the prophetic books. It may also interest you to know that the Roman Catholic Church would include two Apocryphal Books – Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus which is also called Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach.

Wisdom books forms an important part of the Hebrew scripture and thought. The sages of Israel had a great influence on the total life of the people. The wisdom teachings set standards for the moral and ethical life of the people. While wisdom books have differences which distinguishes them one from another, a fundamental element that links them together is their concept of faith. On the issue of wisdom in wisdom literature, Chambers (1963) has this to say:

> The wisdom of the Hebrews does not set out to discover whether God is, nor does it enter into speculating enquiries as to the origin of sin, etc. belief in God is never questioned, and on that basis Hebrew wisdom sets out to deal with practical things as they are.

Having said this, wisdom literature can be defined as a "family of literary genres common in ancient Near East in which instructions for successful living are given or the perplexities of human existence are contemplated (Hubbard, 1962).

3.2   Levels of Wisdom

There are two levels of wisdom. Each level of wisdom is however, designed to give men that quality that will make them live a successful life. These levels are the practical and the philosophical wisdom.

Practical Wisdom

This is also called lower wisdom. It is also known as proverbial wisdom. This is the type needed for everyday living. It deals mostly with ethics, etiquette, morality, inert-personal relationships, attitudes and norms of

societal life. It consists of short pithy sayings which state rules for personal happiness and welfare. It may also come in the form of adages, songs, short poems, compositions, syllogisms and tongue-twisters. This type is found mostly in Proverbs and Song of Songs.

Philosophical Wisdom

This is also called speculative wisdom. It is very philosophical and speculative in outlook. It is thought provoking and full of knowledge and insight. It attempts to delve into such problems as the meaning of existence and the relationship between God and humanity. It may be found mostly in the form of lyrics, epics, odes and even prose- like monologues and dialogues. This is the level of wisdom that dominates Job and Ecclesiastes.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

What is the difference between practical and philosophical wisdom?

3.3   Basic Wisdom Genres

Wisdom literature in Israel occurs in two major genres: the sayings and the commands and prohibitions.

The Sayings

The sayings are sentences that are normally expressed in the indicative mood and are usually classified as follows:

Proverbs

Proverbs are conclusions drawn from experience and formulated into pithy sayings. For such to become proverbs, they must have gained currency among the people to become truly proverbial.

Experiential Saying

This is also called wise sayings. It presents things as a generalization about the way of wisdom based on the insight of experience or a folk expression of plain common sense.

Didactic Sayings

Didactic sayings go beyond mere statements to characterize certain behaviours in such a way to influence human conduct. The aim is to inculcate some value.

Riddles

Riddles are puzzling questions stated as problems relying on mental acumen on the part of the hearer for solution.

Fables

Fables are brief tales embracing moral truths using people, animals or inanimate objects as characters.

Other common forms include the rhetorical questions, allegory through personification, satire and irony.

The Commands and Prohibitions

These types are found mainly in the instructional wisdom. Most times, parallelisms are used in which the prohibition and the command would be expressed as in Proverbs 8: 23 which say:

> Hear instruction and be wise
> and do not neglect it.

In the above example, the command is "hear instruction" and the prohibition is "do not neglect it". However, it is a parallelism because both lines are saying the same thing. In the wisdom tradition, the commands and the prohibitions are usually provided with motive clauses which are either implicit or explicit. Those that are explicit are introduced by 'because' or 'lest'.

3.4   Categories of Wisdom

Wisdom literature in ancient Israel is complex in nature, basically because the ancient sages do not speak with one voice on many issues. As a result, a typology was developed to classify ancient Israelite wisdom. The following are the common types of the categories.

Family Wisdom

This type of wisdom attempts to master life and it is expressed in simple languages and uses proverbs, adages and anecdotes extensively. This type of wisdom is basic since it is in the context of the home wherein parental instruction takes place.

Courtly Wisdom

This is the type of wisdom that was designed to educate a select group of people like princes and the nobility. It prefers to use secular vocabulary rather than a religious one. The didactic method is also employed in the training process.

Scribal Wisdom

This is the type of wisdom concerned with the doctrine and the principles for the scribes. It uses the dialogues, discussions and admonitions.

Nature Wisdom

Nature wisdom attempts to master reality for the sake of human survival. Natural phenomena are observed in relation to humanity and the universal. Nature wisdom celebrates creation and praises God the Creator. Examples are found in Job 38-41 and Psalm 8.

Judicial Wisdom

This is the type of wisdom that deals with the principles of rights and wrongs, good and bad, proper and improper, acceptable and unacceptable. It attempts to enrich life through cumulative experience.

Theological Wisdom

Theological wisdom mostly addresses the disturbing issue of the presence of evil in the world created by the good and omnipotent God and the relationship between God and humanity. It locates knowledge and wisdom within the religious dimension.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Discuss the various categories of wisdom literature.

3.5   Literary Forms in Wisdom Literature

Many literary forms are used to express wisdom. As Fee and Stuart (1993) puts it, "students and teachers alike in the Old Testament homes used a variety of literary techniques as aids to remembering this wisdom." for wisdom literature to be properly interpreted, you need to master these techniques and the common ones are listed below.

Parallelism

The genius of Hebrew poetry is in the realm of thought rhyme (Malick, 2008). The technique called parallelism is the key to this thought rhyme. Parallelism occurs when two lines of poetry are used to correspond one thought with another. Five forms of parallelism have been identified and these are treated below.

Synonymous Parallelism

Synonymous parallelism balances the thoughts or meanings in two lines of poetry by saying the same thing twice in nearly the same way. An example is Proverbs 7:4:

> Say to wisdom, "you are my sister,"
> And call understanding your intimate friend

Synthetic Parallelism

This is also called climatic parallelism. In this type of parallelism, a thought developed in the first line is taken up further by making a little addition to enrich the reader's thinking. According to Malick (2008), the expansion is expressed in a tiered structure in which each line repeats the first with the exception of the last line where a new thought is expressed. An example is Psalm 29:1 which says:

> Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of the mighty,
> Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

In the above example, "glory and strength" is the new thought added to the repeated phrase "Ascribe to the LORD."

Emblematic Parallelism

This type of parallelism uses images to convey poetic meaning. Usually the first line would convey the main point directly and explicitly, the second line would use imagery for illumination. It usually moves from a point to a picture and a very good example could be found in Psalm 23:1, 2, 4:

> The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
>
> He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me
> beside quiet waters.
> Even when I walk through a dark valley, I fear no harm
> for you are at my side; your rod and staff give me courage.

In the above example, it is clear that verse 1 is the stated point and verses two and four are images used to back the point in verse 1 up.

Antithetical Parallelism

This balances the thought in the poetry by stating an opposing fact. In the first line, the thought is stated positively and in the second line the thought is stated negatively. An example is Proverbs 10:1:

> A wise son makes a father glad,
> But a foolish son is a grief to his mother.

In this example, a wise son is set against a foolish son and gladness is set against grief and the father is set against the mother.

Chiastic Parallelism

This is also called inverted parallelism. In this construction, words or phrases in consecutive lines are alternated. A good example is Psalm 51:3:

> For I know my transgressions,
> And my sin is ever before me.

In the above example, transgression and sin is alternated.

The second literary character of wisdom literature is the rhythm of sound. The various forms that can be employed are stated below.

Acrostics

This occurs when each line of poetry is formed with the letters of the alphabet consecutively. This device is a mnemonic tool conveying ideas of order, progression and completeness. You need to know that during translation this beauty get lost. An example is Psalm 119. If you look at the psalm even in English translation, you will discover that it is divided into sections with each section carrying an image of words. The image is the Hebrew alphabets and the words are the names of the alphabet. This is because all the first line in each section begins with the Hebrew letter that is written on top of the section.

Alliteration

This is the consonance of sounds at the beginning of words or syllables. It occurs when each line or word begins with the same consonant sound. For example, the English tongue-twister "Father Francis fried five fishes for five French Fathers from France. An example in the Bible is Ecclesiastes 3:2-8.

Assonance

Assonance is usually the opposite of alliteration. It is the consonance of vowel sounds at the end of words to emphasize an idea, theme or tone. An example is Psalm 119:29. Please note that this character would also get lost during translation.

Paronomasia

Paronomasia is the play on word through the repetition of words of similar sounds but not necessarily identical meanings in order to heighten the impact of the message. An example is Gen. 32:22-24. Please note that this character would also get lost during translation.

Numerical Sequences

This is also a mnemonic, that is, an aid to memory. It occurs when in the first line, a certain number of something is listed and the example goes on to number the things in the subsequent lines. A good example is Proverbs 30:18-19:

> There are three things which
> Are too wonderful for me

Four which I do not understand
The way of an eagle in the sky
The way of a serpent on a rock
The way of a ship in the middle of the sae
And the way of a man with a maid

You should note that in verse 18, the poet says there are four things that he could not understand while verse 19 goes on to list the four things. This statement of verse 18 has to be taken literally unlike the use of three and four in the Book of Amos which was taken as a figure of speech.

Apart from these literary forms, the wisdom works make use of countless similes, metaphors, allegories, tongue-twisters, anecdotes, lyrics and epic poems to achieve their aims.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Explain the different types of parallelism.

3.6   Traditional Understanding of Wisdom Books

It is important to take a cursory look at the traditional understanding of the major Wisdom books because this understanding has influenced the interpretation of these books till now and it is still influencing it! The greatest influence has come from Origen. Origen's acceptance of the Solomonic authorship of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs is still with us today and it is still echoed from the pulpit. Till today, conservative scholars still strive to defend Solomonic authorship of these three books. Let us take a quick look at how the Solomonic authorship for Ecclesiastes can influence its interpretation. In his opening analysis of the book, Unger (1981) upholding Solomonic authorship writes:

> Since a believer who seriously lapses into sin and worldliness
> (as Solomon) did in the latter part of his reign, (1 Kings 11:1-
> 10) experientially duplicates the feelings and sentiments of
> the unregenerate natural man, the message of the book is also
> directed as a warning to all such backsliders.

From this extract, it is clear that for Unger, the purpose of Ecclesiastes is to warn backsliders. Taking this as its purpose however sets the foot of the interpreter on the path of misinterpretation.

As a result of the influence of authorship and consequently of the date in the interpretation of wisdom books, the traditionally accepted Solomonic authorship has to be questioned. Can we accept that Solomon was the author of the book of Proverbs? If yes, what can we do about the authorship evidence provided in Proverbs 30:1 "The words of Agur, the son of Jakeh, the oracle" and Proverbs 31:1 "the words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught him?" Are we to ignore it?

Rather than gloss over or ignore this obvious truth, it is better and safer to see Solomonic attachment to the wisdom books as part of genre identification that was common in the ancient days. Solomon was called the author simply because he was regarded as the patron of wisdom in Israel not that he was the actual author. The same is true of Davidic authorship of the book of Psalm where David was regarded as the patron of the psalms. Whereas there are good numbers of psalms that internal evidence would show us that they were composed by others like the sons of Korah.

3.7   Steps in Interpreting Wisdom Books

Having come so far in the examination of the background of wisdom literature in Israel, we can now proceed to the examination of appropriate steps that should be taken in the bid to interpret the wisdom literature.

Establishment of Historical Matters

The first step to take in interpreting wisdom literature is to settle all historical matters. This includes largely the issues of authorship and the date of writing. These two issues go hand-in-hand. Establishment of the author and the probable date of composition would help the interpreter in determining the general conditions of the period and its influence on the wisdom book. Let us take the book of Ecclesiastes as an example. As said earlier, Solomon has been traditionally upheld as the author of the book, a position that was not challenged until the Enlightenment (though, it is important to note that Martin Luther rejected Solomonic authorship and proposed Jesus ben Sirach as the author). The following internal evidences have been touted in favour of Solomonic authorship:

> The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in
> Jerusalem (1:1)

> I, the preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem (1:12)

> Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasure of men – many concubines (2:8)

> In addition to being a wise man, the preacher also taught the people knowledge and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs (12:9)

Despite the fact that these verses seem indisputable evidence to prove Solomonic authorship, they are not conclusive. The following are the objections against Solomonic authorship.

The first objection comes from 1:12 that has been cited above in favour of Solomonic authorship. The Hebrew word translated "have been" actually implies that as at the time of writing the book the author was no longer king. This raises a problem: was there a time in Solomon's life that he was not king after his enthronement? Going by biblical accounts there was no such a time and even secular accounts did not give a clue to such a period.

The second objection comes from some passages of the book that would be difficult to have come from the pen of Solomon. Examples of these verses are:

> Again, I saw all the oppressions that are practised under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them (4:1)

> If you see in a province the poor oppressed and justice and right violently taken away, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them (5:8)

> There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler, folly is set in many high places and the rich sit in a low place (10:5-6)

The above passages clearly show that the author reflects a lack of confidence in the nation's rulers from the king downwards, the author feels helpless at the sight of injustice in the nation and he abhors the dishonesty in the government bureaucratic set-up. The problem now is this: if Solomon had been the author and the king, would he have not used his position to get

rid of the corrupt officials? If he was really so sympathetic with the cause of the oppressed; would he have not helped to comfort them? With these evidences, is it still then logical to uphold Solomonic authorship? Certainly not!

Apart from this, the use of the phrase 'son of David, king in Jerusalem' is very fluid in Hebrew usage. It may not refer directly to Solomon because any of David's descendants can lay claim to it. This is why some scholars have suggested Uzziah or Manasseh. For example, Bruce (1952) says:

> As to the identity of 'the son of David, king in Jerusalem', Solomon is probably indicated, although later descendants of David have been suggested-notably Uzziah after his contacting leprosy or Manasseh after his captivity and repentance.

If we reject Solomonic authorship of the book of Ecclesiastes; who then is the author? You need to note that the author simply called himself Qoheleth (the Hebrew word wrongly translated Preacher but which may mean Teacher or Philosopher). This is the reason why the Good New Bible used the word Philosopher instead of Preacher and the New International Version used the word "Teacher". The author could then have been an inspired Jewish sage who live much later than Solomon but who has put his words in the mouth of Solomon. On this style in antiquity, Hendry (1970) has this to say:

> The author does not really claim to be Solomon but places his words in Solomon's mouth. We may compare the practice of ascribing written works to famous historical personages which was a familiar literary device in antiquity. It was intended to indicate the type, or genus, of literature to which a work belonged. It was not intended to deceive anyone, and none of its original readers would in fact have been deceived.

This unknown sage is better then called by the name he has called himself. Again Bruce (1952) says "However, we shall refer to him by his self-chosen designation, Qoheleth." Once authorship matters is settled, to see Ecclesiastes as a warning to backsliders according to Unger is already removed. After resolving the authorship issues, the next step is to date the book. Dating most wisdom books you must know cannot be done with all certainty, however, you would be able to pin the approximate era of composition which would help in determine the general conditions. Let us relate this to the book of Ecclesiastes again.

In this book, there is no internal evidence or statement that could have helped in dating the accurately. However, based on language and thought reflected in the book, a period can be postulated. Firstly, the language of Ecclesiastes shows a very late date. Peterson (1971) says, "the language is different from that of other Old Testament books. One reason for this is the strong Phoenician influence on the Hebrew. Such influence points to a date between the seventh and third centuries BC." Secondly, the thought is also clearly post-exilic. An observation of wisdom teachings in Israel shows that in the early stages, competence of wisdom and unfailing success of goodness is emphasized but in the post-exilic period scepticism about the competence of wisdom and unfailing success of the righteous began. This scepticism is reflected in the thought of Ecclesiastes.

These put together would show that Solomon was clearly not the author and that the composition of Ecclesiastes is post-exilic. In the light of external evidence which was based on the assumption that Wisdom of Solomon dated 100 BC quoted from Ecclesiastes, one can safely conclude that Ecclesiastes was written before 100 BC. Most people accept 200 BC to allow a time span for wide circulation of Ecclesiastes.

Establishment of Authorial Intention

By authorial intention, we mean the purpose which the author seeks to achieve by writing the book. This can be done in two ways. Firstly, you can read through the book in case you can get an explicit statement of purpose. Secondly, this can be done by consulting commentaries and Study Bible notes that have been done by authors who had worked on the book before. Once the author's intention is established, interpretation would be easier.

Let us take Ecclesiastes as an example again. It has been said that Ecclesiastes "struggled with the question: how can life best be lived?" this is also buttressed by the fact that at many points in the book, the author states that "I set my mind to seek and to explore …." (1:13; 1:17 and 2:3).
The purpose of the book is to show that there is nothing in this world to give humanity abiding value because it looks as if human beings are helpless and that they would follow a monotonous cycle. He however concludes that apart from God, humanity cannot be humane (12:13) a fact that he has touched on indirectly as he moves through the book.

Identify the Setting

The general setting in which the book was written must be determined so that the influence of the setting on the work can be seen and thus interpretation would be aided. For example, if you agree to the post-exilic date of Ecclesiastes, then the general conditions of the book would reflect that of the post-exilic period. The general condition of that period was one of scepticism. As it has been ascertained earlier, this scepticism is reflected in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Establish the Context of the Passage to be Interpreted

The context of the passage has to be determined to help in understanding the flow of the thought. This is to say that wisdom literature has to be read as a collection. The more you read a proverb in isolation the less clear its interpretation may be (Fee and Stuart). Let us take two passages as an example. The first is Proverbs 21:22 which read:

> A wise man attacks the city of the mighty and
> pulls down the stronghold in which they trust.

The message the wise men are passing across here is that wisdom can be stronger than military might. However, if this line is not seen in line with the context out of which it has arisen, it might be taken literally. This statement compares with the English adage, "the pen is mightier than the sword," which is just to depict the power of printed words in the mobilization of people rather than that of arms or force. It actually does not mean that the weight of the pen is heavier than that of the gun. You need to know that there are times when it is the whole of the wisdom book that would give you the context that would give you the background to good interpretation like in Ecclesiastes.

The second example would be Ecclesiastes 5:18 which read:

> Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to
> drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils
> under the sun *during* the few years of his life which God has
> given him; for this is his reward.

If this verse is taken on its face value, it would mean that the highest good in life is for human beings are eating, drinking and enjoyment. However, if the whole of the book is taken to consideration, such an interpretation would become impossible if you have to be true to your conscience.

Lexical-Syntactical Analysis

You must remember before proceeding on lexical-syntactical analysis that there are so many words in the wisdom literature that cannot be taken literally. As a result of this, you need to analyse the pertinent words in the passage according to its usage in the context of wisdom literature. Let us examine Proverbs 14:7 as an example:

> Leave the presence of a fool
> Or you will not discern words of knowledge

It you take the meaning of fool here as one who lacks common sense perception of the reality of things, that is, the mentally retarded or the uneducated, you are bound to misinterpret the verse. You need to know that in the context of Hebrew wisdom, the word 'fool' actually means an 'infidel', that is an unbeliever who lives life according to selfish, indulgent whims (Fee and Stuart, 1993). So, what this passage of Proverbs is saying in effect is that you do not need to seek knowledge from an unbeliever. He is not even saying that we need to neglect them because in doing so we would not be able to lead them to salvation.

3.8   Practical Application - Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

Having used the book of Ecclesiastes as the example mostly in the steps described above, let us continue using the book for the practical application. In this case, we will begin by setting the literary context of the passages to be interpreted. Remember that the overall general conditions have also been highlighted above. The immediate context of Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 actually begins from 11:7 which centres on the necessity of enjoying life before the coming of old age. From this point then we can continue with lexical-syntactical analysis. We will begin to analyse the pertinent terms verse by verse:

12:1   Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them."

The pertinent terms here are "remember" and "evil days". "Remember" here serves as a call to reverence and worship the Creator during the pleasantness and the sweetness of the youthful days (cf. 11:7). "Evil days" here is used as the opposite of the pleasantness of the youthful days; hence, it means the 'old age'. Thus, the call here is to serve and worship God when

one is strong and full of vigour and not to wait for the period when life would become dull and one can no longer serve God.

From here, verses 2 through 7 becomes a description of what makes the old age to be evil days. According to Peterson (1971), verses 2 through 7 "contain a poignant description of senility, partly metaphorical and partly literal. They give a reason for the teaching to remember God and enjoy life, namely, that the opportunity will all too soon be irrevocably passed."

12:2   before the sun, and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain;

The description above is that of old age borrowed from the Jewish belief that old age takes on the characteristics of the dark cold winter. The whole verse can be divided into two parts: the first part which says that all the luminaries are darkened and the second part which gives the reason - clouds return after the rain. On this verse, Rankin (1970) writes: "old age is depicted as a time of fading light and is compared with winter, when storms darken the horizon. Even after the rain has ceased, clouds again gather and obscure the luminaries in the sky." Thus old age is set in contradistinction to the time of youth which has been described as the time of light and pleasantness (11:17).

12:3   in the days when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look through the window are dimmed.

This verse contains four phrases which forms the metaphoric description of old age. The metaphor now changes to the human body. In this description and subsequent ones, the body of human beings as had been afflicted by old age is now likened to a household which has entered upon hard times and has the service of only very insufficient domestic help. In this metaphor, the keepers of the house are the hands and the arms which begin to tremble as old age takes its toll. The bent strong men are the legs that begin to totter, the grinders (which in Hebrew would literally read "the grinding women") are the few teeth that have been rendered useless because of the little number and those that look through the window are the eyes that are now dimmed as a result of hyper myopia.

12:4   and the doors on the street are shut; when the sound of the grinding is low and one rises up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of songs are brought low;

Except for the third phrase, all other phrases here are concerned with the hearing faculty which at old age becomes hard of hearing. The first phrase depicts the deafness that cuts old people away from the rest of the society. The next phrase literally reads "the sound of the grinding" and will probably refer to the ordinary stir of the household. In other words, all the noisy activities that go on in the whole household would become low and subdued. "All the daughters of music" is a Hebrew idiom for musical notes. So, here the author is saying that the musical notes in the hearing of old people become indistinct because to them they are softer than they really are. In other words, soprano can no longer be distinguished from tenor or bass in the hearing of the aged. The third phrase "one rises up at the voice of a bird" could mean that sleeping becomes light because at the slightest noise, old people would wake up. Another alternative is that the old people would wake up as soon as it is dawn and the birds began to sing.

12:5   they are afraid also of what is high, and the terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets;

The first two phrases are literal. Aged people are afraid of high places and the dangers that encompass a journey. After these two phrases, *Qoheleth* goes metaphorical again. "The almond tree blossoms" is the first metaphorical phrase. This is usually taken as a symbol of the grey hair of old age because as the almond tree blossoms, it is pinkish-white.

"The grasshopper drags itself" is usually taken to be a metaphor for the old people who become burdens to themselves and as they walk have to drag themselves along. "Desire fails" refer to the extinction of sexual desire. The term "eternal home" occurs only here in the entire Bible but its usage corresponds with the Egyptian expression meaning 'tomb'. Finally as the person dies and is about to be buried, the paid mourners are already waiting to do their job.

12:6   before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.

In this verse, two symbolic figures are presented: the light and the water. The silver cord holds the golden bowl. Hence when the cord breaks, the lamp would fall thereby putting out the light. When the wheel and the pitcher at the well are broken, water cannot be drawn again. Since light and

water are common Jewish and biblical symbols for life, the picture here is that of death – cessation of life.

12:7   and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

This verse just tells us the obvious: the body of human beings which was moulded from the dust would moulder into dust and the spirit would return to God, that is, the source from where it came.

12:8   Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

This refrain comes up again at the end of the description of the life of human beings from the youth to death and it confirms again that there is nothing of permanent value in this life, not even the life of human beings is permanent.
The hermeneutical application seems to be that it is good for human beings to remember their God when they are young and full of vigour to serve God for this is the only antidote to the dark, cold days of old age. This is a graphic description of the impermanence of the physical bodies of human beings as well as the helplessness of human beings in the face of these changes. It is also a reminder that every human being will die one day.

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit you have learnt about wisdom literature which is an important genre among the Jews in which instructions for successful living are given or the perplexities of human existence are contemplated. There are also two levels of wisdom: the practical and the philosophical wisdom. you have also learnt that wisdom literature is categorized into family, courtly, scribal, nature, judicial and theological wisdoms. Devices used for wisdom literature includes parallelism which can be sub-divided into synonymous, synthetic, emblematic, antithetical and chiastic parallelism. You also learnt about other devices that include acrostics, alliteration, assonance, paronomasia and numerical sequences among others. You have also learnt about the traditional ascription of the wisdom literature to Solomon and the steps to take in interpreting passages of wisdom literature.

5.0   Summary

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- Wisdom literature is a family of literary genres common in the ancient Near East in which instructions for successful living are given or the perplexities of human existence are contemplated.
- There are also two levels of wisdom: the practical (which deals with issues of everyday living) and the philosophical wisdom (which deals with the problem of the meaning of existence.
- Wisdom literature is categorized into family, courtly, scribal, nature, judicial and theological wisdoms.
- Devices used for wisdom literature includes parallelism which can be sub-divided into synonymous, synthetic, emblematic, antithetical and chiastic parallelism.
- Other devices that include acrostics, alliteration, assonance, paronomasia and numerical sequences among others.
- Traditionally, the authorship of wisdom literature has been ascribed to Solomon

Self-Assessment Exercise

1. List and identify all the various categories of wisdom literature.
2. Discuss the various steps to take in interpreting wisdom literature.

6.0   References/Further Readings

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UNIT 5:   Interpreting The Psalms

Content

1.0   Introduction

In the previous unit you have studied the interpretation of the wisdom books. You have seen the various classifications of wisdom literature and the special use of language in wisdom literature. In this unit, which will be the last unit of this module, you will continue the study of poetic literary genres as we centre on the psalms. Though the psalms are as poetic as most of the core wisdom books, it is necessary to study them as a genre on their own and this is what we are set to do in this unit. The psalms are undoubtedly the best-known and best-used part of the Old Testament by many Christians. Their contemporary use in worship and liturgy makes this feat possible. This familiarity with the psalms however has produced the biggest problem; they are frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted. The misunderstanding that has led to misinterpretation leads also ultimately to misapplication. To clear this misunderstanding, you need to become familiar with the origin, nature and period of composition among others.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Give an example of the misuse of the psalms
- Define the term 'psalm'
- Discuss the various stages in the compilation of the book of psalms
- Discuss the various category of the psalms

- Explain the steps to be taken in interpreting the psalms
- List and discuss the technical terms in the Psalter

3.0   Main Content

3.1   Introducing the Psalms

The term 'psalm' was derived from the Latin translation of the Greek word 'psalmos'. However, in the Hebrew Scripture, the general name of the book is *tehillim* which actually means 'praises' or 'Songs of Praise'. The suitability of this name however can be questioned but it is better to stick to it because "thanksgiving is the very life of the Psalms; even of those in which there breathes most language of complaint" (Durham, 1971). The word '*psalmos*' actually means "songs sung to a musical accompaniment". Thus, you can say that the psalms are songs of thanksgiving and prayer that are set to music.

You need to know that the contemporary usage of the psalms as charms and amulet by some Christians and sects are part of the misuse of the psalms. For example, it is not uncommon to see people opening their Bibles to Psalm 23 and set in under their pillow before going to bed. Another example is the use of Psalm 35 for prayers by those who think some people are working against them. Such people would wake up early in the morning and begin to say "Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me!" This however is not what the psalms are originally written for. The history of the growth of the book of Psalms would 'open your eyes' of understanding.

3.2   The Growth of the Book of Psalms: A Brief History

The growth of the book of Psalms covered so many years because the use of hymns in Israel could be said to be as old as the people of Israel. However, three main stages are noticeable, namely the foundation stage, the cultic stage and the post-exilic stage.

The Foundation Stage

Prior to David's reign, the Psalms have been featuring in Israel's worship, but it was during his reign and his institution of the cult of Yahweh's presence in Jerusalem that the use of the psalms in Israel's worship reached its peak.

As a result of the royal patronage that the cult of Yahweh had during David's reign, many old hymns already in use at the various sanctuaries across the land were adapted for use in Jerusalem. To these, new ones were added and undoubtedly some were written by David himself. It is important for you to know that not all Davidic psalms were even actually written by David as some would want us to believe. This is because the phrase l^eDavid upon which most of them based their claim may not only mean "by David" but can also mean "by David" and "of David". As a result, you can see that the term l^eDavid is actually a designation of the hymnic collection that belonged to David's instance. Poems collected at this stage formed the nucleus of the collections which followed it and which grew for hundreds of years.

The Cultic Stage

As a result of the royal patronage, notable musicians, singers and poets of Israel were drawn to Jerusalem. Consequently, distinct schools and traditions of both psalm-writing and psalm-singing began to emerge. It was these schools that were responsible "for the intermediate collections… composed new psalms and collected and adapted extant ones; they may also be thought of as providing and preserving musical settings for them" (Durham, 1971).

You should know that this second stage of compilation was not completed until the time of King Hezekiah. As indicated in 2 Chronicles 29:30, the Hezekiah revival touched the Temple life and its music ministry. 2 Chronicles 29:30 reads:

> Moreover, King Hezekiah and the officials ordered the Levites to sing praises to the LORD with the words of David and Asaph the seer. So they sang praises with joy, and bowed down and worshiped.

Proverbs 25:1 also gave a similar indication. It reads:

> These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, transcribed.

So we can conclude that as we owe the men of Hezekiah the preservation of some of Solomonic proverbs, we may in like manner be indebted to them for the discovery and preservation of many of the l^eDavid psalms (Perowne, 1976).

The Post-Exilic Stage

This is the final stage in the growth and development of the book of Psalms. In fact, the book of Psalms as we know it today is a product of the post-exilic era. At this point, you need to recognize the tragedy of the Babylonian conquest on the Psalter. The destruction of the Temple would have meant the destruction of the vast and rich treasury of religious poetry. You need to remember that many of the Temple staff (priests and levites) who knew the hymns and the music were killed. It was this tragedy that however led to the beginning of the third stage of compilation. Durham (1971) gives us a hint of what happened at this stage of the compilation of the psalms:

> A mingling of psalms from various traditions; the psalms were recalled and preserved as they have been used in worship, and with little consideration of their origin. It is for this reason, no doubt, that the traditional connections of a great many psalms were lost altogether.

Two things are noticeable from this statement:

a. some hymns from various origins were mingled together
b. some traditions about the psalms and some psalms were lost entirely
c. naturally, there was the composition of new psalms during the exile. In fact, most of the psalms titled "songs of ascent" were composed during the exile.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Discuss the development of the psalms.

3.3   Types of Psalms

The attempt to classify the psalms into categories is one that is fraught with difficulties because of the nature of the psalms. This is because every separate poem is an independent literary entity on its own. This has to be at the back of your mind because though a poem may belong or be related to a type, it is not usually absolutely governed by the type. You need to know that all scholars do not also agree as to the number of types that exits in the Psalter. However, for the purpose of this material, the following types are to be recognized.

Hymns of Praise

These are the hymns and psalms which offer praises to God for who God is. The psalms are used for both individual and group praise worship. Such psalms usually have two parts:

a. **Call to Praise:** such psalms of praise are always opened with a call to praise the Lord or by directly praising the Lord. For example, Psalm 8 opens with the statement, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!" Psalm 146 opens with the phrase, "Praise the Lord!"

b. **Justification of Praise:** such psalms after calling people to praise the Lord continue by stating the reasons why the Lord should be praised. He is often praised as Creator as in Psalm 8 and 19; as Protector and Benefactor of Israel as in Psalm 100 and 149 and as the Lord of history as in Psalms 145 through 147. Psalms that are directly in praise of God for who He is numbers about twenty-six.

Hymns of Thanksgiving

Though some scholars would classify these psalms along with psalms of praise, others feel they should be separated because they are not praise psalms *per se*. These thanksgiving psalms which numbers about sixteen, are expressions of joy to the Lord because of many reasons like God's faithfulness to them, His protection as well as the benefits received from Him. In all these sixteen poems, there are about six that could be regarded as community psalms of thanksgiving and the remaining ten are individual psalms of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving poems are usually of three parts:

   a. **The Call to Give Thanks:** such poems usually open with a call to rejoice and give thanks to the Lord. For example, Psalm 66:1 opens with "shout joyfully to God all the earth".
   b. **Justification for Thanksgiving:** after the call to give thanks, the psalm would continue by stating what the Lord has done in that occasion that demands that the Lord should be thanked.
   c. **Closing Thanksgiving:** the psalm would close again with a call to give thanks to the Lord.

If you use Psalm 66, a type of community psalm of thanksgiving as an example, it would be broken down as follows:

Psalm 66:1-4:   The call to give thanks

Psalm 66:5-12:   The reasons why God is to be thanked
Psalm 66:13-20: Another hymn of thanks closing the psalm

Hymns of Lamentation

Depending on the scholars' attitude to the categorizations, this type of psalms can be regarded as the largest or the second-largest division. If you consider all praise poems together (that is add the thanksgiving psalms along with them), the lamentations numbering about sixty would be the second-largest. However, if you separate the praise psalms proper from the thanksgiving psalm as have done here, then the lamentations would be the largest.

There are also two types of lamentation psalms: the 'group' and the 'individual' lamentation. Individual lamentation usually spring from spiritual, mental, physical and material suffering. It is often a call for deliverance and they are about forty in all. Group lamentations are the corporate cries of the people of God in which God is being reminded that His reputation is at stake. A lamentation psalm usually consists of six parts:

a. Address: the one to whom the psalm is addressed is identified.
b. Complaint: the psalmist would pour out his heart as plainly and as forcefully as he/she can; identifying what the trouble is and why God's help is being sought.
c. Trust: the psalmist's trust in the Lord would be expressed. You need to remember that this trust in the first place is the basis of the psalmist's call for help.
d. Deliverance: the psalmist would then call for God's help and deliverance from the situation the psalmist is in.
e. Assurance: the psalmist would again express assurance that God will deliver him/her. This could come in the form of assertion of deliverance.
f. Praise: the psalm usually concludes with the psalmist offering praise to God for the past, present and future benefits, especially the anticipated blessings.

Using Psalm 3 as an example of lamentation psalms, the following would be the breakdown:

Psalm 3:1a   The Address
Psalm 3:1b-2   The Complaint
Psalm 3:3-6   Expression of trust in the Lord
Psalm 3:7a   Call for deliverance
Psalm 3:7b   The assurance of God's salvation

Psalm 3:8   The closing psalm of thanksgiving for God's
                             faithfulness to His people

Wisdom Psalms

These psalms though relatively small in number, are the contributions of the sages of Israel to the working of Israel. Such works are characterized "by a didactic style and a concentration on the good way in contrast to the ungodly or wicked way" (Durham, 1971). At times, wisdom psalms praise the merit of wisdom and the wise life. Examples are Psalms 37, 49, 112, 119, 127 and 133. These psalms do not conform to any other general plan or division.

Royal Psalms

These are the psalms which bear a direct relation to the rule of David in Jerusalem and most especially his dynasty, though one cannot rule out their repeated use. Psalms in this category are about eleven if one considers the controversial two (that is, Psalms 89 and 132). The others are Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101 and 144.

Salvation History Psalms

These are just five in number (Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135 and 136). Their theme is the review of God's saving work among His people-Israel. It concentrates mostly on deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt.

Psalms of Celebration and Affirmation

Three kinds of psalms are classified here:

Covenant Renewal Liturgies

These are psalms that are designed to lead God's people to the renewal of the first covenant given on Mount Sinai. Examples are Psalms 50 and 81.

Enthronement Psalms

These are the psalms that celebrate the enthronement of kings in ancient Israel. Examples are Psalms 95 through 99.

Songs of Zion

These are the songs that celebrate Jerusalem as the holy city. They see in Jerusalem the fulfilment of God's prophecy to Moses and since the Temple was built in Jerusalem, it becomes synonymous with God's presence. An example is Psalm 46 which in verse 5 reads, "God is in the midst of her (Jerusalem), she will not be moved."

Imprecatory Psalms

Let me tell you from the on-set that imprecatory psalms are not a particular type of psalm but we have to discuss them because they are of high importance and they cut across all the other types of psalms. Luc (1999) also agree that "the term 'imprecatory psalm' does not suggest a genre but refers to a psalm that contains one or more verses of imprecatory." Imprecatory psalms are the psalms that contain "the psalmists' call or wish for divine punishments on the enemies. These are usually in the form of jussive statements and sometimes in the imperatives." The exact number of the imprecatory psalms varies according to the analysis of the statements by scholars. For example, Martin (1972) gave the number as 18 while Benson listed 39 but Luc (1999) stated only 28.

An example of imprecatory psalm is Psalm 137 and the imprecations are in verses 7 through 9:

> Remember, O Lord, against the sons of Edom,
> The day of Jerusalem,
> Who said, "Raze it, raze it.
> To its very foundation,"
> O daughter of Babylon, you devastated one,
> How blessed will be the one who repays you
> With the recompense with which you have repaid us
> How blessed will be the one who
> Seizes and dashes your little ones
> Against the rock

The problem this type of statements in the psalms raises is well grasped by Perowne (1976) as he writes:

> We find in some of the Psalms terrible denunciations of the
> writers' enemies, withering anathemas, imprecations so awful
> that we almost tremble to read them. How are we to explain
> the occurrence of such prayers for vengeance? Are they

justifiable? Are they not the mere outburst of passionate and unsanctified feeling, but the legitimate expression of a righteous indignation? Or are they Jewish only, and not Christian? And if so, then how are we to reconcile this with a belief in the Divine authority and inspiration of the Scripture?

This problem has been variously handled by scholars. For example, some scholars called for a non-literal interpretation of such passages saying that it should be directed against our soul's enemies. This however is just like hiding behind the pin; it does not solve the problem (Adewale, 1996). Luc (1999) identified three other approaches. The first is to see the imprecations as the psalmist's own sentiment before God; the second is to see the imprecations as prophetic predictions and thus of divine announcements and the third approach is to appeal to the covenant as the basis for the curses.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Discuss five types of psalms and give an example of each.

3.4   Technical Terms in the Psalter

Most of the psalms carry certain inscriptions which are mostly liturgical or musical in character. It is important also for you to know what these terms are in the preparation to understand the psalms.

Laminatsech

This word is translated "to the Chief Musician" or "to the Choir Director". The word has its root in the Hebrew *natsach* which means "to be strong" and in the Pi'el stem would mean "to have mastery". As a result most scholars felt that it may refer to either the leader of the band or to the singers or the person to who the song was given in order that it might be set to music for Temple worship. In Psalms 39, 62 and 77, the name of Jeduthun, one of David's three famous choirmasters was added thus making it easy to conclude that the psalm was directed to him to set such to music. The inscription in Psalm 39 is "for the choir director, for Jeduthun. A Psalm of David."

L^{e}Lammedh

This Hebrew term *l^{e}lammedh* meanns "for teaching". These are the psalms that are probably given to be taught either to the people of Israel or the Levites themselves.

L^{e}hazker

The term *l^{e}hazker* means "to bring to remembrance". It has probably come from the root word *azkarah* which means "offering of incense" and it would then mean that such psalms are used to offer prayer in the Temple which is expected to ascend to heaven as sweet smelling incense.

L$_e$thodah

This fourth term *l^{e}thodah* which means "for thanksgiving" is probably a direction that the psalms should be sung when thanksgiving is being offered.

Shir

The word *shir* is the Hebrew word for song. It is also a general name for all the psalms.

Mizmor

The final term is *mizmor* denotes a song sung with instrumental accompaniment.

Apart from these terms, the psalms are often written with the indication of the type of musical instrument that they are expected to be accompanied with. For example, *al shegionoth* which would mean "upon the shegionoth".

3.5   Steps in Interpreting the Psalms

Having now cleared all these salient facts about the Psalms, you can now consider the approach to be taken in the process of interpretation.

Determine the type of the Psalm

The first thing to do in the process of interpreting the psalms is to decide what type of psalm you are interpreting. Is it a psalm of praise,

thanksgiving, lamentation or a royal psalm? This becomes necessary because that would be of help in aiding the interpreter to know the theme of the psalm and the likely language to expect.

Determine its Stage of Composition

You need to determine the stage of composition that the psalm has come from. Was it in the period of Davidic patronage, or the cultic period or the post-exilic period? This would help you to determine the kind of theology to expect in the psalm. For example, the early psalms would reflect more of Deuteronomic theology while the post-exilic psalms would reflect contact with Persian dualism and its effect on Israel's theology.

Determine its Historical Occasion

If a psalm grows out of a historical circumstance (which is going to be the most likely), that historical circumstance should be studied carefully if you are to grasp the message of the psalm. Let us take Psalm 3 as an example. from the inscription of the psalm, which reads, "a psalm of David, when he fled from the face of his son Absalom," the general circumstance under which this psalm was written could be deduced. A good interpreter would then go back and read the account of Absalom's rebellion as recorded in 2 Samuel 15-19. You need to note however that there are some psalms that their historical circumstances are not easily determined.

If Possible, Determine the Author

You need to know that out of all the books of the Bible, it is the book of Psalms that are most subjective. Berkhof (1950) declares that "the psalms are far more subjective than other parts of the Bible, the psychological element is important for their correct interpretation." In getting to this psychological element, you need to unravel the author, study the author's character and the author's frame of mind when the psalm was composed. Since David however can be attached to most of the psalms, you need to be acquinted with David's life and character for this would lead to a better appreciation of the psalms connected with him.

Take the Literary Analysis

Note that I did not mention lexical-syntactical analysis. This is because lexical-syntactical analysis may not work here since the psalms are poems and not prose. It is important to discover that the poetic usage where

necessary and the special use of emphasis in poetry. Let us briefly examine Psalm 121:5-6:

> The Lord is your keeper,
> The Lord is your shade on your right hand
> The sun will not smite you by day
> Nor the moon by night

In these two verses, the following are used poetically: "on your right hand" "shade", "sun" and "moon". If these are taken literally, the thought of the psalm would be lost. Let us then analyse the words one after the other.

On your right hand: Some scholars have taken this literally and conclude that a man's right hand is on the south side which the sun would be hottest and therefore needs to be protected in that area. However, if we consider the Jewish thought about the right hand, the thought of the author would be clear. Two things are to be indicated: the right hand is seen as the hand of one's strength which would then suggest that the Lord shall protect one's source of strength. Secondly, Unger, (1981) identified the right hand is "the position best adapted for the defence of the person being guarded," thus meaning that the Lord would place himself in the best position in the bid to protect you.

Sun: if the sun is taken literally, then this psalm becomes untrue to life because it is impossible for us to be kept away from the rays of the sun as long as we are on earth here. As a result, most scholars would say that the sun is used here to refer to sun-stroke, which is a peculiar threat in the ancient Near East.

Moon: the use of the moon here is also similar to that of the sun. For example, in the ancient days among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, the moon is thought of as having the ability to exert an influence considered dangerous to human health. It is also intriguing to discover that the word for those with mental disorder is lunatic, which comes from the root word 'lunar,' which is also used for the moon. Also the Yoruba believes that when the new moon comes up, the mentally ill may become extremely violent. While not rejecting the thought of scholars on the metaphoric use of the sun and the moon, I feel that the thought of the poet is not more than a daily all-round protection which he has only couched poetically.

3.6   Practical Application: Psalm 127:1-5

This psalm does not contain any clue as to the time of its composition or even any historical circumstance, so, there is no need to rediscover the historical conditions. However, its being included among the "Songs of Ascent" is an indication that it may belong to the second stage of the development of the Psalter. The ascription to Solomon, according to this inscription is a clue that it should be classified as a wisdom psalm.

The author of the psalm cannot also be asserted but because of its language and style, it can be said to be a product of the teachers of the Temple staff, that is, the wise men of the Temple (Durham, 1971). Having established that this psalm is not tied to any particular context, you can proceed on the literary analysis.

Verse 1

> Unless the Lord builds the house,
> They labour in vain who build it;
> Unless the Lord guards the city,
> The watchmen keep awake in vain

The words here are literal. It is a down-to-earth truth. The 'house' in verse one should be seen as the structure called 'house' and not the Temple or the family as some would have suggested. The thought here is that God is the root of all success. If any human being wants to succeed, such a person must have the go-ahead from Yahweh in all his undertakings. The tense, 'they labour in vain' is the perfect tense which should read "they have laboured in vain". Any exercise without God's blessing is a fruitless and worthless exercise.

Verse 2

> It is vain for you to rise up early,
> To retire late,
> To eat the bread of painful labours;
> For He gives to His beloved even in his sleep

The first two lines here give the picture of someone who goes to work early in the morning and returns late in the night. In Perowne's (1976) words, this is an artificial lengthening of the hours of the day. This means that such people are toiling beyond the normal working hours of the day. This line thus continues the thought in verse one: it is only Yahweh who blesses the

little human beings can accomplish within the normal working hour of the day. So, in line three, such overworking is seen not just as 'toil' but a burden the last line has a little textual problem but most people take the word as a variant of sleep. If this is so, the last line is a completion of the thought in line verse two: one should relax at the end of working hours with the belief that Yahweh would bless what has been done during the working period.

Verse 3

> Behold, children are a gift of the Lord;
> The fruit of the womb is a reward

There seems to be a sharp break between verses two and three. This break makes some to feel that the two segments of this psalm are not originally one. However, what I think the psalmist has done is to give a general statement and then in verses three to five the author zeros in on a particular example: children.

The verse opens with 'behold' which now draws particular example to 'sons' as God's own gift. The word translated 'children' here actually in Hebrew is 'sons' and this is understandable in the highly male chauvinistic society of the ancient Near East. However, it is safer to use children. Again, the word translated 'gift' literally means 'heritage'. It connotes the idea of a possession which in Jewish thought is to be seen as a gift. The second line of this verse is just echoing the same thought as the first. It is a parallelism. "The fruit of the womb" is a metaphor for children and they are a reward. 'Reward' here does not carry the thought of what human beings are paid for a good work but something that has been given as a favour.

Verse 4

> Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
> So are the children of one's youth

The poet picks up a simile from the arena of war. Sons are to their fathers what arrows are to a warrior. The arrow is a source of strength, courage, power and confidence to a warrior on the battle field. When a warrior in the thick of battle has many arrows in his quiver, he moves gallantly forward shooting at the enemy. But if he discovers that the arrows are all done, the courage and determination with which he has been fighting would immediately simmer down since his support is gone.

To this, the poet likened "children of youth". What the psalmist meant here is nothing but the children the parents have early in their lives. This type of children is set in opposition to the children of old age. The thought here is that by the time the parents would have grown old, such children would have grown to the point of supporting their parents.

You cannot but notice the mistranslation in the Yoruba version of the Bible here because it translates the 'children of youth' as 'little children' hence leading a host of people to misunderstand and misinterpret the verse.

Verse 5

> How blessed is the man whose
> quiver is full of them;
> They shall not be ashamed
> When they speak with their enemies in the gate

The word 'blessed' may also mean happy. In fact, the Good News Bible translates blessed as happy especially in the beatitudes. People who have many children of youth are bound to be happy because they shall not be humiliated (that is, no one can take advantage of their infirmity in their old age) because their children shall stand by them in case they have a lawsuit against their adversaries. The phrase 'in the gate' also has to be seen in the light of the Jewish culture. Among the Jews, the city gate is the place of judgement (Deuteronomy 21:19; Isaiah 29:21; Amos 5:12) as well as of all public activities. This would then mean that as at the time of the parents' old age, their children would have been admissible to the city gates, thus they would be able to defend their parents. The message of the psalm would be summarized thus:

a. Nothing that any human being does can ever succeed except there is the blessing of Yahweh in their activities. Therefore, there is no need for anybody to overwork themselves. They should work within the working hours and trust in the Lord to bless their work.
b. Children are even an aspect of God's blessings. As a result, in the African society where children are prized, no one should, in the quest for children, go outside God's will for humanity.
c. There is an advice here to human beings. People should have children very early in their life so that by the time of their old age, their children would have grown to the point of being able to support them.

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit, you have studied about the interpretation of the psalms. You are first taught that the psalms are songs of thanksgiving and prayer that are set to music. The book of the psalms has three noticeable stages in its development. The foundation stage was the stage of Davidic patronage and was the period when most of the psalms with the title $l^e David$ were written. The second stage was the cultic stage when the musicians, singers and poets that were drawn to Jerusalem by David's patronage contributed to the growth of the Psalter. This second stage was completed at the time of King Hezekiah. The third stage was the post- exilic stage when psalms of various traditions were mingled together. There are various types of psalms, like the praise, thanksgiving, lamentation, wisdom, royal, salvation history, celebration and affirmation psalms and imprecatory psalms. You have also learnt the meaning of most technical terms in the Psalter and the steps to take in the process of interpretation.

5.0   Summary

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- Psalms are songs of thanksgiving and prayer that are set to music.
- The book of the psalms has three noticeable stages in its development.
- The foundation stage was the stage of Davidic patronage and was the period when most of the psalms with the title $l^e David$ were written.
- The cultic stage was when the musicians, singers and poets that were drawn to Jerusalem by David's patronage contributed to the growth of the Psalter.
- The post-exilic stage was when psalms of various traditions were mingled together.
- Imprecatory psalms are the psalms that contain "the psalmists' call or wish for divine punishments on the enemies.

Self-Assessment Exercise

1.   Discuss the development of the Psalter.
2.   Discuss the processes involved in the interpretation of the psalms.

6.0   References/Further Readings

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Module 3   Interpreting the New Testament

MODULE THREE   INTERPRETING   THE   NEW TESTAMENT

I welcome you to the third module of this course in biblical hermeneutics. I believe you have enjoyed the first and the second modules that dwelt squarely on the history and methods of interpretation and interpreting the Old Testament. Your understanding of this module depends also on your mastery of module one. This is because most of the general principles highlighted in module one have been practically utilized in module two and would also be utilized here.

Before we set out on Module Three, there are two basic fundamental issues to be resolved. First, what is the New Testament? There are two major sides to this question and both are undoubtedly correct. Any interpreter that does not take the two sides into account has already started on the path of bias which will affect the interpretation.

Firstly, the New Testament is a collection of historical documents. This is right because almost all our knowledge of Christ's life and the beginning of Christianity are derived from these. To wish away this aspect of the New Testament is to set out from the beginning on a wrong path because as most scholars agree, the New Testament is largely an occasional document. Secondly, the New Testament is also Scripture. Since the beginning till today, the New Testament has been regarded not only as authoritative but also as sacred and inspired as much as the Old Testament.

These two major sides of the New Testament leads us to the main problem – how much is it the word of God and how much of humanliness have gone into it. As a result, a tension exists in the bid to balance these two major truths of the nature of the New Testament. It is this tension that the interpreter has to handle in a creative way. Dunn has this to say:

> Of course, there is a potential tension
> between these two aspects – seen at its
> most extreme in the contrast between the

academic scholar with narrow historical interests on the one hand, and the 'simple believer' on the other reading the Bible as God's voice speaking directing to him in the here and now.   But the task of New Testament interpretation is precisely to handle that tension and to ensure that it is a creative rather than a destructive tension.

Now, your belief and opinion about the New Testament forms your attitude to the business of interpretation. If you are on the historical extreme, you will miss the spiritual flavour and if you are on the sacred extreme, you will loose focus of the historical circumstance out of which the sacred message has grown out. You need to known that there is no such thing as a presuppositionless exegesis. You bring into the text your pre-understanding and if these are wrong, you have definitely started out on a wrong note.

UNIT 1:   Interpreting The Gospels

Content

1.0   Introduction

You are welcome to the first unit of the third and last module of this course. Indeed you have come a long way. By way of remembrance, you have studied about the general history and principles of interpretation in the first module and in the second module you have been exposed to the principles and practice of the interpretation of the Old Testament. In this module, you would be learning the interpretation of the New Testament. This module is divided into five units and each unit would be focusing on the gospels, the parables, the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles and Revelations. In this first unit, you will be focusing on the interpretation of the gospels. The gospels are very complex and interesting and you will need to study about them cautiously. You might come across some statements that might want to put you off but put aside all prejudices and come to this study with an open mind.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Discuss the nature of the gospels.
- Evaluate the role of biblical criticism in interpreting the gospels.

- Discuss the historical analysis of the gospels
- Identify the steps to take in interpreting the gospels

3.0   Main Content

3.1   Introducing the Gospels

The English word 'gospel' is derived from the Greek word '*euangelion*' which is translated 'good news'. The New Testament as we have it today contains four canonical gospels, namely: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Of all these four gospels, the striking relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke makes scholars to refer to them as the synoptic gospels. Synoptic is derived from the Greek word '*sunopsis*' which would mean 'seeing together'. On the other hand, the Gospel of John is remarkably different and is always treated separately from them.

3.2   Nature of the Gospels

The very nature of the Gospels makes it mandatory to devote a whole unit to the consideration of the how of its interpretation. The nature of the Gospels has ignited a big controversy about the purpose and content of the Gospels. Are they really historical or are they theological?

It is true that the Gospels are some kind of biographies but we need to understand which kind of biographies they are. We need to understand however, that unlike the modern biography, the Gospels are not interested in the analysis of mental and psychological development, environmental and childhood factors which bore upon Jesus' personality neither are they interested in the evaluation of strengths and weaknesses (Wiens, 1977).

Another issue to consider is that the events that were recorded by the writers of the Gospels were selective. This selectivity was reflected in the Gospel of John:

> And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written (John 21:25).

According to the above statement from the Gospel of John, it is clear that there are some events and incidents from Jesus' life that were not reported in the Gospels. If the materials then used in the Gospels are selective, what

then is the intention of the writers that would ultimately form the basis for material selection? The answer to this question would be found in the Gospels of Luke and John where we have authorial intentions declared.

Luke 1:1-4	John 20:30-31
Luke 1:1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, Luke 1:2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, Luke 1:3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; Luke 1:4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.	John 20:30 Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; John 20:31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

Form these "two discrete statements of intention, it becomes clear that the stated purpose for writing the Gospels comprised both historical and theological facets" (Wiens, 1977). For example, it became apparent from the Lukan perspective that the Gospel writers were concerned with historical truth. In verse 3, the writer declared that he had investigated the reported events carefully before putting them down in order. It is however also clear that the writers were not stenographers who have the duty of reporting what they have seen verbatim: they were after theological truth as embedded in the historical facts.

This seeming tension between history and theology in the Gospels has led to two contradictory positions among scholars, the conservatives on the one side and the liberals on the other side. However, for some of us, the tension is unnecessary. Describing this tension as a fallacy that pervades the thinking of many, Wiens (1977) states:

> Because the evangelists were theologically motivated is no
> ground for arguing that the kerygma has so beclouded the

facts of the historical life of Jesus that these are irrecoverable or even that they have been so dramatically altered so as to distort the *Sitz im Leben Jesu*. To imply, as some do, that the evangelists were unable to transmit an objective and reliable account of Jesus' life because they wrote from a subjective stance of faith is to misunderstand the nature of any history-writing enterprise.

3.3   Biblical Criticism and the Interpretation of the Gospels

Modern scholarship on the New Testament has come a long way on the issue of biblical criticisms especially as regarding the interpretation of the Gospels. Though some theological conservatives are afraid of this enterprise, its result is far more rewarding that the seeming dangers. In this section, you would be looking briefly at the following aspects of biblical criticism.

You need to know that the development of the New Testament, especially the gospels, makes this endeavour necessary today. For example, it may interest you to know that "the four Gospels of the New Testament were originally anonymous," (McNicol, 2007), that is, the writers do not identify themselves. The ascriptions that we have today were later additions by the church. Stanton (2004) indicates that an investigation into the papyri of the second and third centuries as well as evidences from other manuscripts shows that the contemporary titles were added by the first half of the second century.

Apart from this, the church did not have the original copy of these writings because they have all probably perished. However, we do know that they were probably written on papyrus rolls. This faces us with a grave problem: if the autographs are lost, how are we sure that what we have today were what was originally written? This quest gave birth to textual criticism as you would soon learn. You also have to know that before the Gospels were written, they existed in oral form and they are passed down by mouth. This was supported by Luke 1:2 when the author said that he was compiling the account "just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses." The Greek word used for handed down is typically used for oral transmission. This gave birth to source and form criticism. Now with these tips, we can go on with the brief survey on biblical criticism.

3.3.1 Textual Criticism

Since neither this course nor this unit is on textual criticism, we will simply establish the relevance of textual criticism to the interpretation of the Gospels. If per chance you get interested, you can obtain more information from books on textual criticism.

Dana and Glaze (1973) defines textual criticism as a "scientific discipline that attempts to restore the original text of a document which has perished." The work of the textual critic cannot be over emphasized because the first step to correct interpretation is the establishment of the original text as nearly as possible. At this point, you may begin to wonder what the relevance of textual criticism to interpretation is. It is not far fetched! Textual criticism lies at the root of translation work! In other words, the version of the Bible you hold is the product of textual criticism.

Let me point out here that most Christians are 'fanatical' about King James' Version and to them it is almost as authoritative as God's spoken word! While agreeing that the language of KJV is flowery and beautiful, textual criticism today has established in many places its inaccuracy. Let us take two examples from the first Epistle of John just to illustrate point here. In 1 John5:7-8, the King James' Version reads:

> For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father,
> the Word and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.
>
> And there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit and
> the water and the blood: and these three agree in one.

The same passage in RSV reads:

> And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth.
>
> There are three witnesses, the Spirit, water and the blood, and
> these three agree.

The New American Standard Bible reads:

> And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is
> the truth.

> For there are three that bear witness, the Spirit and the water
> and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

From the above quotations, it is apparent that KJV differs entirely from the others. What has happened in this instance? While KJV based her authority on minor manuscripts of later date (221, 2318) and lectionaries, the RSV and others based their authority on major manuscripts like Codex Sinaiticus, Alexandrianus and Vaticanus. Thus one can assert that the readings of the KJV are a later manuscript amendment. It was not in the early manuscripts.

The second example would be taken from 1 John 4:19, which in the King James' Version reads: "We love him, because he first love us." The American Standard Version which is based on a better text reads: "We love, because he first loved us. To the casual reader there seems to be no major difference. However as Dana and Glaze (1973) noted, there is big difference:

> Notice how much richer the meaning becomes when the
> correct text is used. The love of God for us is more than just a
> foundation of our love for him; God's love for man is the
> basis of all true love. Man has the capacity for love because
> he is created by a God who loves him.

The presence of 'him' in the KJV is due to the late and inferior manuscript used as at the time of editing the Textual Receptus (the text upon which the KJV is based) thus limiting our response to God's love to loving God only. It is definitely more than that.

With all these, are we now saying that it is practically difficult for laymen to interpret the Bible? Or that those who don't have access to Greek and or Hebrew cannot interpret the Bible? Not exactly! They can avoid all these technicalities when they use more than one version of the Bible and use it critically paying adequate attention to all footnotes. For example, if you are using Revised Standard Version and you examine the ending of the Gospel of Mark, you will discover that between verse 8 and verse 9 of Mark 16, there is a paragraph spacing and a footnote numbered 'k' which reads "some of the most ancient authorities bring the book to a close at the end of verse 8…" Paying attention to such critical notes in the modern versions will help you have an idea of the textual matters at play in the passage you are interpreting.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Discuss the importance of Textual Criticism to interpretation.

3.3.2 Source Criticism

Source criticism is an aspect of biblical criticism that seeks to understand a literary piece better by attempting to establish the sources used by the author and or redactor who put the piece together. It is based on the premise that the biblical writings as we now have them are a combination of once distinct oral or written documents that were only brought together.

Source criticism is concerned with two main problems: the first is the problem of locating the source for a single document (as in the case of the book of Genesis). The second is to locate the sources and the relationships between sources for independent documents (as in the case with the Synoptic Gospels).

The first established history of source criticism is its application on the Pentateuch and the conclusion by Wellhausen (Adewale, 2007). The theory postulated four separate sources, today known as the JEDP sources. It is after this that the same methods were applied to the Gospels, especially the Synoptic Gospels with far reaching results.

3.3.3 Form Criticism

Form criticism is a method of biblical criticism adopted as a means of analyzing the typical features of texts, especially their conventional forms or structures, in order to relate them to their sociological contexts. Form criticism is an attempt to analyze oral materials (or written materials that have been transmitted orally) by identifying their literary forms and reconstructing them in their most primitive versions.

The genesis of form criticism can be traced to K. L. Schmidt who in 1919 published *The Framework of the Story of Jesus* and concluded that:

- Mark was the earliest Gospel
- Matthew and Luke used Mark and other non-Markan materials.
- Mark was made up of short episodes
- These episodes were connected by bridge passages that provided chronology and geography

However, the first person to really apply from criticisms to the gospel tradition was Martin Dibelius. However, Rudolf Bultmann who worked after Dibelius has his more much more closely associated with form

criticism that Dibelius because he tried to ascertain the original units of the synoptic gospels and establish the original setting of each unit.

Let us have an example of the function of form criticism. Form criticism has classified the sayings of Jesus into two broad classes: Apophthegms and Dominical Sayings. Classified further under the apophthegms are: controversy dialogues, scholastic dialogues and biographical apophthegms while dominical sayings include proverbs, prophetic/apocalyptic sayings, I sayings, parables, narratives, miracle stories and historical narratives and legends.

3.3.4 Historical Criticism

This seems to be the most important step in the interpretation of the Gospels (and the epistles too). This historical criticism has to be seen in two dimensions one of which carries more weight in the interpretation of the Gospels. The aim of historical exegesis however is to reconstruct the historical situation out of which a given book or passage has arisen. This is important because a book that is translated outside its original historical situation is highly liable to misinterpretations.

The first dimension of historical exegesis has four essential elements namely: the author, the readers, the date and occasion and purpose. On the second dimension we have to reconstruct the historical context of Jesus (both general and particular) and the historical context of the Evangelist. Let us now take the elements one after the other and see the role they play in the process of interpretation.

The Author

Here you are just concerned with merely identifying the author but one has to discover, as much as possible his character, mental habits, distinctive views, his environment and heritage of ideas. All these qualities are in operation as the author selects his materials and as he writes the Gospel. Let me use the Gospel of Luke in comparison with Matthew and Mark to illustrate this point. Of all the Synoptists, it was only Luke that gave special emphasis to social concern especially to "people who stood outside the pale of religious and social responsibility" (Fitzmeyer, 1983). As a result, most of the materials designated Lukan (that is, materials in Luke that is not in any other Gospel) are geared towards that end. Hence materials like the Good Samaritan (10:25-37), the ten Lepers who were healed (17:11-19), concern for tax collectors (3:12-13; 18:9-14; 19:1-10) and the stories concerning women are prominent in the Gospel. All these

help the interpreter to lay hold of the theology of the Evangelist and his choice of words and the slanting of materials. For example, it is this Lukan interest in the tax-collector and sinners that made him put the parable of the Lost Sheep in the context of Jesus' fellowship with tax-collectors and sinners with the Pharisees grumbling context of Jesus instructing his disciples while in the Gospel of Matthew, the same material is found in the context of Jesus having a discussion with his disciples.

The Readers

One of the salient facts we always overlook as we read the Bible is that we are only but secondary readers. We need to remember that because the books of the Bible were written to certain people who are most probably known to the author, the "thinking and the expression of his though are affected by his knowledge of the character, views and capacities of those for whom the book is intended" (Dana and Glaze, 1973). So, the interpreter of today has to get as much information as possible about the readers' environment. For example, certain words or illustrations may have meaning for them but not for us today except we enter into the world view of the readers. For example, Luke 9:62 reads: "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God." What does this mean?

This verse only becomes meaningful if you remember the environment of the first readers. The soil there was thin and rocky, as a result the plough would not go deep into the ground and consequently if the person ploughing looks back, (that is gives divided attention), it can result in producing a crooked furrow or in cultivating it will result in uprooting and destruction of plants. So the verse is just a picture of one who seeks to serve Christ with a divided loyalty Dana and Glaze (1973) says that those in that position usually fail to move forward in line with the true workers in the kingdom and they also create discord and uproot the good that has already been sown. It is as a result of unfruitfulness and potential destructiveness that unstable people are declared unfit for God's kingdom.

The Date

The ability to determine the date in which a book was written helps in the process of interpretation. This is because it will help us to know the general conditions that prevailed at the time of writing, the progress of thought and the influences if such on the author. These conditions and influences may help you in determining why a material was used by a particular evangelist and the slants that have been introduced.

Let us use Luke 15 as an example in this case. In this chapter, Luke had three parables joined together as one (note that v.3 reads: and he told them this parable). Out of the three parables, only one seems reduplicated in Matthew 18 (the Lost Sheep) while the other two are peculiar to Luke. Now, the question is why are those materials so important that Luke had to use them. It is glaring that the parable centres on the issue of acceptance of a 'sinner' on return with joy.

As far as I am concerned, the uniqueness of this material is tied to the issue of date. According to Ellis (1981), "the Gospel of Luke was published during or shortly after the Jewish rebellion or … round about A. D. 70." Tolbert (1967) also concludes that "Luke wrote his work after Nero's reign" which will also place the writing of Luke around A.D. 70 for Nero, Rome's fifth emperor ruled from A.D.54 to A.D.68. Adewale (1996) concludes that "if this is true, there is the possibility that the apostates during Neronian persecution were returning to the church and the church was unwilling to accept them." Now in trying to interpret that chapter, if you did not give adequate attention to the date, the main import of the chapter would be lost.

The Occasion and Purpose

The two elements are difficult to separate because one is usually determined by the other. It is quite clear that purpose is determined by occasion. Both however constitute an important factor in interpretation. As Dana and Glaze (1973) stated, to understand thoroughly a writer's thought processes we need to know the goal toward which those thought processes are directed. And to achieve this, the interpreter must be acquainted with the occasion and purpose.

The purpose also determines the selection of material by the author (evangelist). This is because as had been said earlier, the Gospels cannot be regarded as a biography in the modern sense of the word but a careful selection and arrangement of materials to a particular design or goal.

Having dealt with the elements that constitute the first dimension of historical criticism, we can now move on to the second dimension, which is the context in Jesus' life and the context in the Evangelist's ministry.

The Historical Context of Jesus

The historical context of Jesus can be seen from two perspectives: the general and the particular.

Jesus' General Historical Context

To have a complete and good understanding of Jesus you need to study him against the background of his days – the first century Palestinian Judaism. For example, one needs to understand who the Pharisees are, why Jesus seems to be so often in opposition to them, their theology and life style. Most of these incidentally are not supplied by the Bible; you need a good deal of outside reading. Any good book on New Testament Introduction could give the necessary hints though briefly. In fact a good student of the scripture must get himself acquainted with the Jewish history at least from Alexander the Great to Jesus' days. Good books on this include:

J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*
E. Lohse, *The New Testament Environment*
D. S. Russell, *From Alexander the Great to Herod*
M. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*

Jesus' Particular Historical Context

I have to confess that it is often difficult to reconstruct Jesus' particular historical context. By this term, we mean the particular incidences that led to each teaching or story or parable. The difficulty in reconstructing this has to do with the nature of the Gospel. For about a period of 30 years after the ascension, the deeds and words of Jesus (which later form the mega-source for the Gospels were passed on orally while some of these pericopes (that is, individual stories or sayings) were passed on withier original historical contexts, many were also transmitted without them. At times, the Evangelist even reconstructs the historical context to suit his theology.

Uncovering this particular historical context is however important because it will broaden your perspective and help in understanding the point Jesus is making. So, as you read the stories, you have to pin down whom Jesus' audience was (his disciples, the crowd or his opponents) and what event led to the pericope.

The Evangelist's Historical Context

This section is concerned about what prompted each author to write the Gospel in the first place. This will account for peculiarity, differences in material arrangement and special emphasis. For example, Luke in 14:

15-24 tells us about the parable of the Great Banquet. This parable is also recorded in Matt. 22: 1-14 with great differences which will help illustrate what we mean by the historical contexts.

One thing to notice is that the parable of the Great Banquet in Luke falls into the great division in Luke tagged "The Travel Narrative" in which the most peculiar Lukan material are presented. And because of Luke's special emphasis on the poor, women and the maimed most pericopes here concerned them. Let us begin to examine the parable from the beginning in comparison to Matthew's record.

First, the context differs. According to Luke 14: 1, Jesus had been invited for luncheon by one of the Pharisees when one of the invited guests evidently thinking himself sure of the heavenly banquet said "Blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God" (v. 15). The parable is Jesus' answer that those who had been invited and neglected the invitation shall by no means eat bread, evidently tearing the guest's assurance down. According to Matthew, the parable was told to the chief priests and the Pharisees who were seeking to arrest him. This change in context accounts for many differences.

Secondly, according to Luke, after those invited originally had neglected the invitation, the host called specifically for the poor and crippled and blind and lame (v.21, 25). These were the ones accepted for the feast. But in Matthew they were to gather in as many people as they can find (v.9)

Thirdly, while Luke ends his parable at the acceptance of the poor, the blind, the lame and the crippled at the feast, Matthew's account went longer to the exclusion of even one of those invited ad-hoc. This point now reveals the historical circumstance of the Evangelist. Since Luke was concerned about those regarded as 'social outcasts' their acceptance at the feast is a good point to end the parable. You can now see how the determination of all these will definitely help in throwing more light to the Gospel narratives.

Self-Assessment Exercise

What are the elements of historical criticism?

3.3.5 Redaction Criticism

The term redaction criticism was coined by W. Marxen to denote the method whereby the critic investigates how the writers of the gospel have

expressed their theological outlook by means of the selection, arrangement and editing of pre-existing traditional material. To buttress this, Perrin (1969) defines redaction criticism as the determination of "the theological motivation of an author as this is revealed in the collection, arrangement, editing and modification of traditional material, and in the composition of new material or the creation of new forms within the traditions of early Christianity."

The forerunners to redaction criticism were Germans, namely: Hermann Reimarus, David Strauss and Wilhelm Wrede. The beginning of redaction criticism proper is traceable to Bornkmann, Conzelmann and Marxen. Though usually criticized for its dependence on the four-document hypotheses, subjectivity and the tendency to reject the authenticity of the Bible, redaction criticism have enhanced the study of the Gospels greatly because it has helped in revealing the theological side of the Gospels, the correlation of history and theology in the Gospels and revealing also the homiletical nature of the Gospels.

3.4   Steps in Interpreting the Gospels

Having gone thorough this preliminaries, we can now go on to the steps to take in interpreting the Gospel materials.

Compare with Parallel Stories

When tackling a periscope in the Gospels, the first thing you need to do is to study the parallel passage in the other Gospels, especially if you are dealing with the Synoptic Gospels. For example, the periscope of "The Rich Ruler" recorded in Luke 18: 18-30 has its parallel in Mt. 19: 16-30 and Mk. 10: 17-31. It would be necessary for you to read the accounts in these three Gospels.

The purpose of this however is not to fill in details of the story of the main text from the other two texts because doing that will distort the work of interpretation. As iMonk (2009) stated, "don't harmonize the Gospels. That's like taking four paintings and combining them into one. You come up with something no one painted and no one intended to paint. Let each Gospel author be an artist in his own right." Reading the parallels however will help you to appreciate the distinctiveness of any given Gospel. This will also help you to appreciate the different kinds of context in which the same material lived in the church. When you have read the parallel stories, you will be able to compare and contrast the evangelists' text one with the other and this would aid you in redaction criticism.

Determine the Historical Contexts

As indicated earlier, some pericopes have two historical contexts-that of Jesus' ministry and that of the Evangelists' church. A good interpreter will seek to establish the two historical contexts. This is because as Fee and Stuart (1993) indicates:

> …good interpretation may require appreciating a given saying first in its original context as a proper prelude to understanding that same word in its present canonical context.

In other words, if you are able to understand a saying in its proper context, you will easily discern how the Evangelist has used it in its own context.

Do your Lexical-Syntactical Context

As we have said before now, the Bible has not come to us in the language and words of men and therefore it is important to examine the important words that are central to the text as well as the syntactical implications within the text. You must ensure that you comprehend the significance of every term in the passage even to the smallest particles. For example, John 20:30-31 says:

> Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

You will agree that the key word in verse 30 is 'sign'. An elaborate study of the word would reveal that out of its 73 appearances in the New Testament, Johannine usage accounts for 24 against 10 in Matthew; 7 in Mark and 10 in Luke. Further study would show that while the synoptic Gospels used the word sign to denote the "perception of certain data as a purpose of confirmation," (Bromiley, 1984) its usage in Johannine literature is radically different and it is used mainly in the sense of a 'pointer'. Thus as far as the above passage is concerned, the words of Jesus Christ are a pointer to the divinity of Jesus Christ. This is what verse 31 indicates: "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God".

Let us take another example that will illustrate syntactical analysis. This example is coming from Luke 2:14. In the King James' Version, this verse reads:

> Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will
> toward men

This statement raises a big question: has the coming of Christ brought peace and good will toward all men? In all sincerity, the answer is no! If the answer is no, what then does this verse mean? The answer is found in the syntactical relationship of the words in this verse.

The Greek word translated 'good will' is in the genitive case in the Greek language and this is the case that denotes possession. Consequently, rather than translate that the 'good will' as something that is given along with peace, it should serve to qualify the men to whom the peace comes. The understanding is what is reflected in later translations. This is why the New American Standard Bible translates the same verse as follows:

> Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men
> with whom He is well pleased

So the message of the verse is that the peace that Jesus has brought is only available to men who have entered into God's good will.

As you work on the lexical-syntactical analysis, it also pays to examine the author's use of figures of speech and what they meant in his days so as to get the full import of the message of the text.

3.5   Practical Application: Matthew 28:16-20

This periscope has been titled "The Commissioning of the Disciples" and is paralleled in Mark 16:14-18 and Luke 24:36-39. So, if we are to compare the parallel passages we would discover a lot of discrepancies. Firstly, this parallel passage in Mark belongs to that part of Mark that was said by later versions of the Bible not to belong originally to the text of Mark. Secondly, the context into which Mark put the story is a house where the eleven disciples were eating and the words of Jesus here are longer to include the signs to follow the believers. The Lukan parallel differs radically. Though the setting looks similar to Mark, his emphasis on the coming Holy Spirit robs him of the emphasis on the commission.

The historical context is the meeting of the disciples with the resurrected Jesus at Galilee. So according to Matthew, it seems to be the last interaction between Jesus and his disciples. Now, you can concentrate on the verses containing the commission, that is, verses 19 and 20.

> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them
> in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The first thing to note here is the word 'go'. You should note that in the Greek New Testament, the word is not in the imperative as the English text has made it to be. The Greek imperative would have been *poreuesthe* and not *poreuthentes* as in the text. So, its tense in the Greek is present continuous tense, thus a literal translation would have been 'going' or 'as you go'. So, considering the figurative usage of the word, the sense here is "as you go about you normal walk in life".

The next word to consider is 'therefore'. This word is to be regarded as an adverb modifying the verb 'go'. The meaning of 'therefore' is "for that reason" or "consequently" so it serves as a linker word connecting verse 19 to verse 18. The thought then is that because all authority has been given to Jesus, the disciples can take the actions of verse 19, that is, they can make disciples as they go on in life.

The next key phrase is 'make disciples'. Since a disciple is regarded as a pupil or leaner. The Commission given to the disciples is not to make converts but people who will take Jesus as their master and learn from him.

> Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo: I
> am with you always, even to the end of the age.

The first key word here is 'teaching'. The significant thing here is the fact that the word is in the present participle which is usually used to denote a simultaneous action. Therefore, you can conclude that the teaching activity goes on simultaneously with the baptizing and disciplining activity.

Having completed the interpretation, the following can be derived from it:

a. The work of evangelism is what the disciples are expected to do not by setting a special time for it but as they go about their normal duty or work on earth. Evangelism should thus become part of the work that is natural to the disciple.

b. The authority of the believer to embark on evangelism is the authority of the risen Christ who now holds the sovereign authority on earth.
c. Evangelism does not mean witnessing. It includes the process of teaching and disciplining. This is a warning to the contemporary church who is becoming a master of proclamation rather than teaching or building up, that is, disciplining the members of the church.
d. That baptizing and teaching are expected to be simultaneous points to the need to baptize converts immediately while the teaching process goes on.

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit you have learnt a lot about the Gospels. You have learnt that by their nature, the Gospels combine the qualities of history and theology together thereby creating a tension. However, the fact that the evangelists were theologically motivated is not enough ground to say that they have beclouded historical facts or distorted the *Sitz im leben Jesu*. You have also learnt that biblical criticism is a tool that could be advantageous for the interpretation of the Gospels despite the fears among the conservatives. These include textual, source, form, redaction and historical criticism. Historical criticism includes issues of authorship, date, recipients, occasion and purpose and context.

5.0   Summary

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- By nature the Gospels comprised both historical and theological facets.
- Biblical criticism, despite fears among conservatives is a veritable tool in the interpretation of scriptures.
- Textual criticism is a scientific discipline that attempts to restore the original text of a document that has perished.
- Source criticism attempts to establish the sources used by the author or redactor who put the Gospel together.
- Form criticism is the means of analyzing the typical features of texts.
- Historical criticism attempts to reconstruct the historical situation out of which a text has arisen.
- Redaction criticism investigates the manner in which the writers of the Gospel have expressed their theological outlook by the means of

selection, arrangement and editing of pre-existing traditional
material.

Self-Assessment Exercise

1. Discuss the importance of historical criticism in the interpretation of
   the Gospel.
2. Citing relevant examples cite the importance of biblical criticism in
   the interpretation of the Gospels.

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UNIT 2:   Interpreting The Parables

Content

1.0   Introduction

In the first unit you have considered the interpretation of the Gospels. In that unit you have been taught about the uniqueness of the Gospel in that it combines the qualities of history and theology thus creating a tension for interpretation. In this unit you would be focusing on the parables which are unique within the Gospels. You may begin to wonder that after a long session on the interpretation of the parable, is there any need for a separate unit on the parables? Indeed, this chapter may seem unnecessary because what is true of the Gospels is also true of the parables. However, this chapter becomes necessary because, one, by their nature, the parables have attracted a lot of scholarly work and two, despite the simplicity of the parables they have suffered a fate of misinterpretation. In fact, Fee and Stuart (1993) opines that after Revelation, the parables are next in being misinterpreted. I promise it is going to be an interesting and rewarding session.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Define parables
- List various types of parables
- Write briefly on the history of interpretation of the parables
- Discuss the steps to take in interpreting parables
- List some important scholars that have worked on the parables.

3.0   Main Content

3.1   Introducing the Parables

The English word 'parable' is actually a transliteration of the Greek work *parabole* . The Greek work itself is also a translation of the Hebrew word *mashal*. Because of the presence of parables in Hebrew intellection, the Old Testament is the right place to begin the study of the meaning of parable. The word *mashal* has been used in many ways:

a.   It has been used as a by word or a proverb as in 1Samuel 10:12; "therefore it became a *proverb*: is Saul also among the prophets?"

b.   With its usage in Proverbs 26:18-19, *mashal* could mean wise sayings that are made up of examples from life, vocational or moral advice, admonition and also religious instruction.

c.   In the prophetic literature, parables have become a complete story with a hidden meaning that is either discerned independently or by the prophet. An example of this is Isaiah 5:1-7. In vv.1-6, the real story is given and the prophet gave the interpretation or the hidden message in v.7.

d.   By the development of rabbinical Judaism, parables had taken the form of short sayings, allegories or stories. It is this rabbinical usage that forms the basis of the usage of parable in the New Testament.

Now considering the literal translation of parable which is "putting things side by side", parables can be defined as interesting illustrations drawn from everyday experiences to communicate a spiritual truth, religious principle or moral lesson". Mark Bailey (1998) defines a parable as "a figurative narrative that is true to life and is designed to convey through analogy some specific spiritual truth(s) usually relative to God's kingdom program."

By nature, though parables are usually narrative in form (it is not of place to have a few that are poetic) they are figurative in meaning using both simile and metaphor to make their analogies within the intent of informing, convincing or persuading their hearers.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Define a parable.

3.2 Brief Historical Development of the Interpretation of Parables

Early Church to the Middle Ages

As it was with the history of interpretation as a whole, the interpretation of parables began with the allegorical method. The principle behind this was that "the parables were considered to be simple for those on the outside, to whom the real meanings, the mysteries were hidden. These belonged only to the Church and could be uncovered by means of an allegory" (Fee and Stuart, 1993).

The problem with this method was same as the discussion on allegorical method of interpretation in Module One Unit Two. Let us use an example from this period: the interpretation of Saint Augustine on the parable of the Good Samaritan. St. Augustine sees the traveller as Adam, Jerusalem as the heavenly city from which Adam fell and used Jericho to mean Adam's mortality. The thieves were the devil and his demons who stripped him of his immortality and left him half dead (that is living as a man but spiritually dead). The Priest and Levite represent the ministry of the Old Testament and the Samaritan is Christ. As interesting as this interpretation may be, I can say with all certainty that this is not what Jesus intended to teach. However, despite the gross inadequacy of the allegorical method, it flourished in the interpretation of parables from the early ages of the church through the Middle Ages. It is in this vein that Herrrick said "obviously, such allegorizing has disastrous affects on the practical authority of the Bible for its message becomes completely obscured and there is no reasonable method whereby we can adjudicate between competing interpretations."

The Reformation

This period has been tagged the era of great religious revolution. Before this period, learning seems to be the sole possession of the church, but the Renaissance prepared the way for the Reformation which began on the eve of All Saints' Day, 31 October 1517 when Martin Luther in his 95 theses challenges the church's position on indulgences. The Reformation thus led to systematic and scientific approach to the study of the Bible. Thus, people like Martin Luther began to reject allegorical interpretation of the parables. However, this period was largely one of transition in that while some scholars depart from the allegorical method, some like Calvin stuck to it as the only way of interpreting the parables.

The Post-Reformation to the Contemporary Day

The Post-Reformation period led to the modern approach to the interpretation of parables. It began with Adolf Julicher in 1888. It was Julicher who nailed the coffin of allegorical interpretation when in his book *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* he "argued strongly that parables contain a single picture and teach a single point" (Riesenfeld, 1970). Since Julicher, however, many scholars had built on his foundation. Only three of these are important here and their positions will be discussed briefly.

The first person to build on Julicher's work was C. H. Dodd. Because of the fruit of form criticism, Dodd proposed that the understanding of parable must include an enquiry into the life situation of the parable. He went further to identify two life situations for the parable: that of "Jesus ministry and that of the evangelist and his readers. Dodd (1961) writes:

> *The original "setting in life of any authentic saying of Jesus was of course provided by the actual conditions of His ministry. But the form critics rightly call our attention to the fact that the formed tradition of His teaching as it reaches us, has often been affected by the changed condition under His followers lived during the period between His death and the completion of our Gospel.*

He then concluded that for proper understanding of a parable, one may have to remove a parable from its setting in the Church to that of Jesus' life.

J. Jeremias followed C. H. Dodd. He only moved a step away from Dodd by identifying the steps to be taken in removing a parable from its setting in the Church to that of Jesus' life.

K. E. Bailey is the next important scholar in this realm. He agreed that the historical approach as taken by Dodd and Jeremias is right. He, however, proposed what can be termed a cultural angle to the historical approach. So, he proposed that the historical approach 'must be re-examined in the light of additional evidence from the cultural milieu of the parables (and that) the aesthetics must be viewed in the light of Oriental literary forms" (Bailey, 1976).

After these ones have written myriads of interpretative approaches that are definitely out of tune with the spirit of the biblical age and definitely not too good methods for interpreting parables. Mark Bailey (1998) describes the interpretative enterprise as follows:

> More recent trends have tended to see the parables as literary art at the expense of historical interpretation. Consequently some writers have returned to the approach that sees multiple meanings based on the subjective philosophical self-understanding of the interpreters rather than the historical objectivity of Jesus and His message. The past fifteen years or so have been dominated by a "sophisticated" literary criticism and structuralism which seems to be more concerned with the style of argumentation than the historical interpretation. From the pendulum-like extremes of Jülicher and the multiple meanings allowed by the extremes of the philosophical linguistic movement, a more cautious balance is being sought by recent conservative writers.

It is within this period that the advent of a reader-response approach to scripture berthed. An important example of this is the phenomenological approach of R. W. Funk and J. D. Crossan which paid more attention to the original impact and "surprising reversal" of the parable. You should note that "though evangelicals will find much useful material here, the presuppositions with which Funk and Crossan approach the text are at odds with scripture's self claims and evangelical understandings of scripture's divine inspiration" (Herrick).

Another interesting approach of this period came through Dan O. Via who proposed what is called the aesthetic-rhetorical approach that laid emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of the parables themselves. In this approach, Via sees the internal pattern of the parables as a clue to their interpretation and uses Aristotelian categories of comic and tragic plot lines to elucidate their meaning.

It is cheering to know that in the last few years however, sanity has returned to the enterprise authors like Robert Stein, David Wenham, Craig Blomberg, and John Sider have sought to interpret Jesus' parables in a more conservatively manner after the interpretation have gone full swing and seemed to have retuned to the allegorical tendencies of the Early church era to the Middle Ages.

Self-Assessment Exercise

List the names of important scholars in each phase of the interpretation of parables mentioning their contributions to the interpretation of parables.

3.3   Steps in Interpreting the Parables

From the fruits of the many years of work on the parables from various and sundry scholars, the following can be said to be the steps to be taken in interpreting the parables.

Uncover the Historical Setting

In the earlier units you would have undoubtedly noted our insistence on the historical setting of the passage to be interpreted. This historical setting is of great importance event to the parables. In fact, Herrick (n. d.) says that many writers have misunderstood the parables because they have not given adequate attention to their historical setting. Doerksen (1970) also notes that "the modern critical method is to remove the parable from the setting." In fact, most of the contemporary methods of interpretation like the allegory and the aesthetic among others are good in overlooking the historical setting. As far as Dodd it is important to interpret the parables first of all in their original *Sitz im Leben,* that is, in their original setting in the life of Jesus and in the context of his ministry. In other words, before one should seek to understand the significance of the parables for one's own situation today, one should seek the original meaning of the parables and their application for Jesus' audience in the first century. This historical setting would be uncovered through the following steps.

Identify the audience

Identification of the audience to whom the parable is spoken is the first step to be taken in determining the historical context of the parable in Jesus' ministry. If the audience is identified, it would help in determining how the

original hearers would have identified with the story, and therefore what they would have heard.

Determine the life situation in Jesus' ministry

What occasioned the parable in the ministry of Jesus? This would give us the context or the setting of the parable would give us the context or the setting of the parable in history. This is the second step towards determination of the historical context of the parable. The timing of the parables in the historical development of Jesus' ministry is not accidental. For example, Jesus spoke a number of His parables in response to the national leaders' rejection of Him, and so those parables were weapons of controversy in exposing the self-righteousness of the opposition and in extolling the kingdom of God (Jones, 1982). Other parables were instruments of instruction for encouraging the disciples to be faithful. Thus, you can see that the parables can be interpreted properly only by understanding the audience and the occasion that promoted them.

Determine the life situation in the Evangelist's Church

This is an examination of the peculiarity of the parable to the particular evangelist. To be able to accomplish this, the parallel in other evangelist's work is to be read and compared with the main text. Remember like Herrick (n. d.) opines, it is not by accident that some parables appear in one Gospel and are omitted from others, for on closer examination it will generally be seen that their record is in keeping with the character of the Gospel in which they appear.

Determine the Cultural Situation

Many scholars have reiterated the importance of uncovering the cultural setting in the process of interpreting the parable.

Ramm (1970) states that, "in the interpretation of every parable it is necessary to recover as much as possible the local colour employed in it." Russell (1912) opines that "most of the stories involve customs, conditions, and ideas peculiar to the Jews of Palestine in Jesus' time and therefore require explanation before an American reader fully understands them." Though Russell here talked about the American being unable to understand Palestinian Jews, but what he said here is also true to the Africans or anybody outside the Jewish culture. Herrick (n. d.) explains this further:

Each parable Jesus spoke was taken either from analogies to nature or from people's reasoning and judgments. These were taken out of the thought and mind-set of ordinary persons living in Israel. Studies in the local colour of the parables have turned up a rich store of information.

Reading any parable with the 20th Century eye will easily lead to misunderstanding. So, as one reads, statements and actions that are bound with the Jewish culture are to be studied in the light of the Jewish culture.

Analyze the Structure and Details of the Parable

A good and detailed study of the parable must take along five major elements: biographical progression, which tracks the lives of people; historical progression, which follows the sequence of events; chronological progression, which unfolds the narrative with time indicators; geographical progression, which journals the changes of place; and ideological progression, which focuses on the development of ideas. As you do this, you also continue with your lexical-syntactical analysis taking note of the special use of words since you are dealing with a parable.

3.4 Practical Application: The Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4-7)

Let us take the parable of the "the Lost Sheep" as our example here. The text would be Luke 15:4-7 and the parallel text would be Matthew 18:12-14.

The major thing to do first is to determine the historical context of this parable. If anyone proceeds to interpret this parable from Luke 15:4, such a person is bound to misfire. Luke gave us both the historical and the literary setting in verses 1-3. According to Luke 15:1-3, the Pharisees and the Scribes were grumbling at Jesus who was eating with sinners and tax-collectors. So, as v.3 indicated, Jesus spoke the parable as a response to the Pharisees' accusation. Thus, the primary audience are the Pharisees and the Scribes.

The determination of this parable in Jesus' ministry will take so many things into consideration, especially the socio-religious stratification of the Jewish society in the time of Jesus. As vv. 1-3 indicates, Jesus was in the habit of receiving tax-collectors and sinners. The use of the periphrastic imperfect in the Greek is used to describe a habit or action that occurs frequently, so the life situation of Jesus will be seen more graphically by

examining the relationship between the 'pious' and the 'sinners' in Jesus' days. The use of the word 'receives' sums up the action of Jesus. Considering the other occurrence of this word in Luke 9:5; 10:8 and the conclusion of Liddel and Scott (1968), one cannot but agree that the word means to 'receive hospitably' and thus table fellowship comes into operation here. In other words, Jesus hosted the sinners and the tax collectors to meal in his house. As Arndt (1956) noted, eating with sinners was:

> … considered the height of improper conduct for a self-respecting Jew and especially a rabbi. Any contact with publicans and sinners and with Gentiles was considered defiling… the climax of such violation was table fellowship.

A rabbinical injunction, Mechilta 576, on Exodus 18:1, also states that "let not a man associate with sinners even to bring them near to the Torah." Another rabbinical law states that:

> He that undertakes to be an associate may not sell to an *am-ha-'aretz*... or buy from him…; and he may not be the guest of an *am-ha-areta* nor may he receive him as a guest on his own raiment.

Considering this social condition which is the breach between the tax-collectors and sinner on the one hand and the Pharisees and the Scribes on the other hand, one should see the parable as mediation between the two strata of the social ladder. So, what Jesus intends to correct with this parable is the prevalent belief that association with a sinner will contaminate and that the most effective way to bring a sinner to God is to exemplify God's love by relating to such a sinner.

As one now compares this parable in Luke to its parallel in Matthew, the historical context changes. According to Matthew 18:1 this parable was addressed to Jesus' disciples. It becomes more of an ecclesiastical instruction or a summons to the disciple to pastoral concern for erring members. The difference in this context shows the uniqueness of Lukan setting and in relation with his concern for the social outcasts.

Now, the next thing to do is to examine the use of language and the text.

> v.4:   What man among you, if he has a
> hundred sheep and has lost one of them,
> does not leave the ninety-nine in the open

<div style="text-align: center">pasture, and go after the one which is lost
until he finds it ?</div>

The first phrase that worth nothing is "and has lost one of them". This phrase seems to indicate that Jesus was saying that the shepherd was responsible for the loss of the sheep. This is quite the opposite in Matthew. Matthew 18:12 says "and one of them has astray…" The Lukan understanding of this phrase is crucial; the shepherd is responsible for the loss of the sheep.

Another question that will be raised here is the rationale behind leaving the remaining.99 sheep in the open pasture. Though it is not stated, one needs to accept that in keeping with the culture of his people the shepherd left the remaining 99 sheep in charge of other shepherds because in Palestine, shepherds do not graze their sheep individually-but in groups (cf. Gen 13:7).

The last thing to be noted is that the searching went on until the lost sheep was found.

v.5.　"And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing."

The first thing that strikes one here is that the sheep was found. The next thing is the phrase" he lays it on his back. The point is this: having found the sheep, it has to be brought back to the others. This is line with Bailey, points to the task of restoration.

The last word that attracts attention is "rejoicing". Because the sheep has not been killed by a wild animal or marooned on the dangerous cliff, the shepherd rejoiced and it was this joy that overshadowed the burden of restoration. In his joy, he did not feel the weight of the sheep as he carried it on his shoulders.

v.6.　And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!"

The verse is omitted entirely in Matthew. The key point here is that there was communal joy at the restoration of the lost sheep.

v.7.　I tell you in the same way, these will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Most scholars agree that this verse would probably be Luke's own interpretation of the parable and not part of the original parable spoken by Jesus. This is buttressed by the fact that the version in Matthew omitted this despite its importance in the understanding of the parable.

The key phrase in this verse is 'over one sinner who repents'. This phrase will definitely lead one to ask some questions: if this phrase is linked with the parable, who has repented? What then is repentance?

To the first question, the sheep is clearly the answer. That the sheep is the answer is made more compelling because the 'one sinner' is compared to the remaining 99. If one agrees that it is the sheep that ahs repented, the complication becomes more staring. According to the story, the sheep was pictured as being passive in the process of the search for it and its restoration. What then is the picture of repentance here? In this parable, Luke had simply equated 'being found' with 'repentance' thus setting out a radically new understanding of the nature of repentance. Having gone through the analysis of the passage, what are the lessons that can be derived therein?

1.   The parable was originally directed to the Pharisees and the Scribes whom the Lord addressed as shepherd in the parable. Thus, Jesus likened those who are supposed to be religious leaders to shepherds and illustrated their duty. The shepherd in this parable can be seen doing four things, namely:

   (a)   he accepts responsibility for the lost sheep;
   (b)   he searches without minding and counting the cost;
   (c)   he rejoices at the burden of restoration; and
   (d)   he rejoices with the community at the success of restoration.

Therefore, we could see Jesus challenging the Pharisees to stop their hitherto attitude towards the sinners (the moral and social outcasts) and rejoice at their coming to the kingdom instead of murmuring at it.

So, by this parable, Jesus has made us to see that the Pharisees had forgotten their role and reason for existence. Thus Luke is using this parable to tell Christians not to forget the purpose of their existence as the Pharisees had done, but to delight in caring and seeking for the lost and erring members of the church and even to seek for them till they are found.

This position is enhanced by the Matthew usage where the disciples are told not to allow one of the little ones to get lost.

2. The joy of the shepherd is another clear emphasis. Through the parable, Jesus told the Pharisees that instead of murmuring, they need to join the celebration. Again the message comes to the church, when an erring one comes back to the church, there is no need to review his sins or despise him – he is to be welcomed with joy.

3. Closely related to this is the joy in the burden of restoration. To bring the lost sheep back, the shepherd pays price by searching for its and carrying it on his with joy. One thing that should be pointed out is that "without the shouldering of this burden, there is no restoration". Thus, this parable tells Christians that they have to shoulder the burden of restoring erring brothers and sisters and lead those still outside home.

4. Finally, the nature of restoration is re-defined. Luke redefined the rabbinical concept of restoration which has shaped the church's concept of restoration too. Repentance has been viewed as a work that man will do to earn God's favour. But in this parable, the sheep is pictured as passive. It did not attempt to go back on its own. The point here is that the search of the shepherd goes beyond the issue of repentance. Therefore, it is a call to the Church not to become parochial as they wait for sign of repentance in a backslidden member but to seek even before the erring ones realize what they have done.

A good analysis of this parable will provide an important message to the contemporary church.

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit, you have learnt that the English word parable is a transliteration of the Greek word '*parabole*' which is in turn a translation of the Hebrew word '*mashal*'. You have also learnt that the word *mashal* is used in Hebrew to cover a wide range of sayings from the simple proverb to a full scale complete story. You have also been told that because of their uniqueness the parables have gotten much attention froms scholars and various methods of interpretation have been used on the parables from the early church to date. Some of these methods are the allegory, historical-grammatical, cultural exegesis, phenomenological approach, aesthetic-rhetorical approach and the reader-response method among others.

5.0   Summary

The following are the major points you have learnt in this lesson:

- A parable is a figurative narrative that is true to life and is designed to convey through analogy some spiritual truths usually relative to God's kingdom programme.
- In the Middle Ages the allegorical method was the prevalent method used to interpret the parables.
- Adolf Julicher nailed the coffin of allegorical interpretation when he argued that a parable contains a single picture and teaches a single point.
- Dodd and Jeremias built on Julicher's foundation by calling for an understanding of the parables' historical setting.
- Bailey called attention to the importance of reading the parable through the eyes of a 1st Century Palestinian.
- The historical setting of a parable includes: the author, the audience, date, purpose and occasion, the life situation of the parable in Jesus' ministry as well as that of the Evangelists

Self-Assessment Exercise

1. Discuss briefly the history of interpretation of parables.
2. What are the steps to take in interpreting the parables?

6.0   References/Further Readings

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UNIT 3:   Interpreting the Acts of the Apostles

Content

1.0   Introduction

In the last unit you have considered the interpretation of the parables. In that unit, you have learnt that the parables have received more attention that any other biblical genre because of their uniqueness. You have seen some of the many methods that have been applied in the course interpreting the parables. In this unit you would be examining the book of Acts of the Apostles. Learning how to interpret this book I can assure you is a very interesting exercise mainly because of the issue of hermeneutical precedence that you would be learning at least from the theoretical point of view. I can assure you that by the end of this unit, you would have learnt

some things that you have not known about the nature of the book of Acts before.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Discuss the historical quality of the Book of Acts
- Identify the various mindsets interpreters bring to the book of Acts
- Explain the geographical purpose of the book of Acts
- Assess the impact of the hermeneutical problem of the book of Acts
- List the steps to take in interpreting the book of Acts

3.0   Main Content

3.1   Introducing the Book of Acts

The Acts of the Apostles is the only historical book in the New Testament because 'it traces the development of the early church after the Ascension of Jesus" (Adewale, 2006). The current position of the book (that is, its being placed between the Gospels and the Epistles) in the canonical order is well suited because it is actually fills the gap between the Gospels and the Epistles. As Guthrie (1970) rightly observes:

> It (the book of Acts) serves admirably as a link between the records of Jesus and the apostolic correspondence. In many ways the Epistles are not fully intelligible until they are ready against the background of the book of Acts. The book shows effectively the main trends in the development of Christianity and presents in effect samples of the continuing work of Jesus.

Writing in the same vein, Hunter (1965) also states:

> We can hardly overrate the importance of Acts for our knowledge of the origins of the Christian church. Lacking it, how little we should know about the immediate sequel to Resurrection! Without it, we should be largely ignorant of the events which led to the writing of the New Testament epistles. Acts is the link which holds together the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament.

It is from this undoubted importance of the book of Acts that its problem in hermeneutics comes from. Because of this historical quality of Acts, different people come into the book with different views and mind-sets which affect their understanding and consequently, their interpretation. Commenting on these various attitudes, Fee and Stuart (1993) states that:

> Some are greatly interested in historical details, that is, what Acts can furnish about the history of the primitive church. The interest of others in the history is apologetic, proving the Bible to be true by showing Luke's accuracy as a historian. Most people, however, come to the book for purely religious or devotional reasons, wanting to know what early Christians were like so that they might inspire us or serve as models.

In resolving this problem, you must be able to ascertain how much of an historian Luke was and establish the purpose for the book of Acts.

Self-Assessment Exercise

What makes the book of Acts unique in the New Testament?

3.2   The Historical Quality of the Book of Acts

There is no doubt that Luke wanted the book of Acts to be historical in outlook. However, you have to know that Luke's view of history is still not our own picture of what history should be. You should understand the following about Luke's view and use of history:

Firstly, Luke's use of historical material is selective. Why Luke has to be selective is not made plain but there are two suppositions: the materials are so vast that he has to select materials that will make him achieve his purpose. You should compare this with the statement of the author of the Gospel of John in 20:31

Secondly, Luke was not just an historian; he was part of the history. From this point it becomes clear that objective analysis becomes difficult. Since Luke has become part of the history (as testified to by the 'we' sections of Acts), there is no way by which he could detach himself from the thrill.

So, one has to conclude that Luke was not just a cut-and-paste historian that was concerned with the chronological accounts of the growth of the church. He was a historian and an evangelist and a theologian all at once.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Discuss the nature of history in the book of Acts.

3.3   The Purpose of the Book of Acts

As said earlier, you have to accept the fact that the purpose for which Luke wrote Acts is one major factor in determining the selection of his materials and without doubt the structure of the book itself. The question now is: what is that purpose?

The purpose of Luke in Acts is closely linked with that of the Gospel of Luke because the two books are just volumes of the same work. That the two books are just volumes of the same work is attested to by the prologue of the book of Acts:

> The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up *to heaven*, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen (Acts 1:1-2)

The reference to the first account and the dedication to the same person 'Theophilus,' show that the book of Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke.

However, there is no doubt that from the structure of the book, that Luke was concerned with the growth of Christianity. In the first place, Luke was concerned with the geographical growth of the church. Also, the numerical and the qualitative growth of the church was also his focus. Corroborating this fact from the structure of the book, Tenney (1961) has stated that:

> Acts is constructed logically around the outline of geographical development given in 1:8: '*ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth'.* The first section after the introduction deals with the beginnings in Jerusalem. The second gives glimpses of work in Samaria, the coastal plain, and Caesarea. The last two sections take the message to the cities of the Mediterranean would, ending with Rome, the capital.

The whole book of Acts can be broken down to the following sections in such a way as to reveal this geographical movement:

1:1 – 6-7 deals with the primitive church in its entire Jewish setting. Everything about the church is Jewish. This section ends with indication of friction between Greek speaking Christians and Jewish Christians.

6:8 – 9 9:31 describes the first geographical expansion spearheaded by Hellenistic Jews. It includes the account of Paul's conversion.

9:32 – 12:24 describes the first expansion of the gospel to the Gentiles. Cornelius' conversion is a key story here as God used Peter and worked miraculously.

12:25 – 16:5 the first geographical expansion into the Greek world led by Paul. The church officially receives the Gentiles as Gentiles and not Jews without laying any Jewish burden on them.

16:6 – 19:20 the church moves to Europe.

19:21 – 28:30 a description of events that moved Paul and the gospel down to Rome.

Another thing that is clear apart from Luke's interest in tracing the development of Christianity geographical was its racial movement. Luke was not just concerned with the growth of Christianity but 'the transition from Judaism Christianity to Gentile Christianity.'

The second clear purpose of Luke is that Luke was not interested per se in tracing this geographical and historical development and the biographies of any of the apostle (not even Paul or Peter) but that the expansion of the church was the work of the Holy Spirit. This becomes apparent because 'at every key juncture, in every key person, the Holy Spirit plays the absolute leading role. According to Luke, all of this forward movement did not happen by man's design; it happened because God willed it and the Holy Spirit carried it out'.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Using the book of Acts as a guide, discuss the purpose of the book.

3.4   The Hermeneutical Problem of the Book of Acts

If the book of Acts has existed solely for the purpose of historical precedence no hermeneutical problem would have occurred. However, because people read in Acts more than a historical precedence, a problem exists. Describing this problem, Fee and Stuart (1993) writes:

> Does the book of Acts have a Word that not only **describes** the primitive church but speaks **as a norm** to the church at all times? If there is such a word, how does one discover it or set up principles to aid in hearing it? If not, then what do we do with the concept it precedent? In short, just exactly what role does historical precedent play in Christian doctrine or in the understanding of Christian experience?

The problem of the historical precedence in interpretation is heightened by the belief of many people that the Acts is a picture of the primitive church and that what the church should do today is to capture this feeling, Gooding (1994) states that:

> Acts carries for us all a powerful unspoken exhortation to examine ourselves honestly to see whether the Christianity we represent and the gospel we preach are uncompromisingly the same as this established by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So the problem one is now faced with is this: should we accept that all that happened in the church as described in Acts must happen in the Church today? Are we to meet for worship on Saturday as they did? Are we to observe the Lord's Supper daily as they did? Are we to sell all that we have and contribute to a central purse as they did? If not, how then do we read and interpret Acts to today's undertaking? In helping to resolve this problem, Fee and Stuart (1993) identified the three categories to which doctrinal statements from scripture can be classified to and these are:

a. Christian theology, that is, what Christian ought to believe,
b. Christian ethics, that is, how Christian ought to behave and
c. Christian experience and practices, that is, what Christians ought to do.

Now, the three classes are derived from two levels of expression which can be tagged as primary and secondary levels of expression. The primary level statements are statements that are derived from the scripture explicitly or as direct commands. Consequently, more often than not, the primary level statements are concerned with what the scripture intends to teach. The

secondary level statements are statements derived by the principles of implication. They are the outcome of what was taught explicitly.

When these three categories are brought to bear on the problem of historical precedence, what you will discover is that most of the time, it bothers on the third category (Christian experience and practice). It usually has no bearing on theology or ethics. Let us use the issue of the Lord's Supper to illustrate this principle. In Luke 22:14-20 (cf. Mark 14:22-26; Mt.26:26-30, 20), the Lord Jesus Christ commanded that the apostles must continue that ordinance in his remembrance. The phrase is "this do in remembrance of me". You will discover that it falls on the third category of doctrinal statements. It is on the primary level because the fact that Christians are to partake of this Lord's Supper was commanded and it was ordered. This is what the scripture intends to teach. However, when one comes to the book of Acts, except where reference was made to Jesus' assertion on the night of the institution of the Lord's Supper, the level of statements become secondary.

For example, Acts 2:46 reads:

> And they, continuing ***daily*** with one accord in the temple, ***and breaking bread from house to house***, die eat their meet with gladness and singleness of heart.

What we can imply here is that the early church following Jesus' command did not neglect the Lord's Supper. We also can infer that it was done daily. Then the question is this: should we partake of the Lord's Supper daily? What you have to hold on to is except that when things are taught explicitly on the primary level, questions of historical precedence should not be binding. However, where it can be inferred that is what the Scripture intends to teach, then it could be normative.

As a result of this, you can now arrive at the following as hermeneutical principles that could be applied to the book of Acts:

1. For any statement in the book of Acts to be regarded as normative for Christians today, it must be related to what the given narrative **intends** to teach. That is to say all the narratives are not entirely normative for the church today.

2. Quite often, what is incidental to the **intent** of a Scriptural narrative is the writers' understanding of what the Scripture intends to teach. And as such, it should not be regarded as being normative and

therefore not binding on the Church toady. As Fee and Stuart (1993) puts it, "what is incidental must not become primary."

3. For historical precedent to be normative, it has to be established that the narrative intends to give the precedent a normative value. In other words, that is what it intends to teach.

4. On the category of Christian experience and practice, biblical precedents may be regarded sometimes as repeatable patterns even if they are not meant to be normative. However, to establish this, one has to be guided by the following:

    (a) This is possible when only one pattern is found and that pattern is repeated elsewhere in the New Testament.
    (b) If the pattern that one has is in harmony with what is taught elsewhere in the Scripture.
    (c) If the pattern is culturally conditioned, it is not to be repeated or if it is to be, it has to be translated into the new culture.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Discuss the problem of historical precedent in the book of Acts.

3.5   Steps in Interpreting the Book of Acts

Having travelled briefly into the hermeneutical problem we are faced with in the interpretation of the book of Acts, we can now go forward to delineate the steps to be taken in the interpretation of the book of Acts. The steps are listed and discussed below.

Establish the category of the doctrinal statements

As one studies the passage to be interpreted, one needs to make a note of the doctrinal statements that occurs therein. After this, one needs to establish the category of each. Is it theological? Is it ethical? Is it practical? As discussed earlier, theological and ethical statements can hardly be questioned. However, practical statements can be.

Establish the level of the statements

After establishing the categories of the doctrinal statements, you need to ascertain the level at which such statements occurred. Are they on the primary or the secondary level? Remember that if they are on the primary

level, they are mostly to be narrative, but if on the secondary level, they are likely to be just peculiar to that time.

Establish the intent of the passage

In other words, what does the passage seek to teach? If this is established, all statements on the primary level would be related to it. This would also help to define the relationship between the secondary level statements and the intent to establish if such precedents are repeatable.

Delineate the precedents

Now, one can establish which of the precedents are normative (and so a must for the contemporary Church to conform) or repeatable (that is the church can use though not compulsory) or culturally conditioned (that needs not to be repeated or that can be repeated with cultural modifications).

Thus, you can see that going into the book of Acts just simply to proof- text is not using the book of Acts as it should be used. The understanding of the challenges that the book of Acts poses to church today is such a complex one.

3.6 Practical Application: Acts 6: 1-7

> Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the nature Hebrews, because their widowed were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "it is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.

> But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.

> But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon,

Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

And the word of God kept on spreading; and the numbers of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

From the passage quoted above, the following doctrinal statements are obvious:

1. The widows were taken care of daily by the church.
2. The ministry of the word should be supreme
3. Others are to be selected to serve in other ministries
4. Such leaders must be of good reputations, full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

Having identified these four doctrinal statements, one can now proceed to categorize them. A careful observation of these four would reveal that they are all on the third category of Christian practice and experience. None is theological or ethical.

The next step is to determine the level of the statements. All these statements as listed above are all on the secondary level. There is not direct command, and they are all implied from the practices of the early Church.

The next step is to identify what the intent of this passage is. Three things are immediately clear:

a. The church has to take social ministry within the church very serious; and
b. As the ministry of the church expands, other leaders have to be selected to help in the ministry. A multiple staff ministry is the only kind suitable for the church.
c. The ministry of the word must never be over shadowed by any other ministry no matter how important that ministry would be. And the ministry of word must also take other ministries (especially, social ministry) into cognizance.

So, as stated earlier, what the passage intends to each must become normative for the church today. The three intents listed above must be the rule for us toady. We must partake in social ministry, within and outside the church. We must learn to use as may ministers as possible in a local

church and allow others to partake in variety of ministries; and ministry of the word must remain supreme but not at the expense of other ministries.

In his own analysis, Gooding (1994) relates this passage (Acts 6:1- 7) to the earlier passage, especially the healing of the cripple which he sees an intention to teach social ministry outside the church. This is his conclusion:

> Both stories show the early Christians taking seriously their social responsibility, the one to the world around (as with the cripple) and the other to the members of the church (the daily distribution of food to the Christian widows). And both stories remind us of the all-important need to keep our social duties in their proper place and proportion, and never to allow them to usurp or eclipse the pre-eminent place and important of the preaching of the gospel and the teaching of the word of God.

After the identification of what the passage intends to teach, thus, what is normative for the contemporary church, one can now look at the historical precedents again to see which would be normative, repeatable or culturally conditioned.

The first of these is the daily service to the widows. This precedent, though is an aspect of social ministry it is not normative. One cannot but agree that it is culturally conditioned because as Smith (1972) notes:

> *The Jews had a great reputation for their welfare work with the poor and the widows. When the Jews became followers of Christ, they continued the practice to which they were accustomed.*

Does this then mean that we can throw away this particular precedent? Not at all. We can adapt it to our own culture. In other words, we are not bound to feed widows daily in the church toady. In our own cultural and local context, we only need to device means by which we can meet their daily needs.

The second precedent is the instance of the twelve not to abandon the preaching and teaching of the word to ministry at the table. This should be normative. No minister must allow anything to distract his attention from the preaching and the teaching ministry. He must learn to delegate jobs to the learning saints who are eager to learn how to serve their Lord.

The third precedent is the election of seven brethren to serve at the table. In this single point, three things are locked up: some men were elected; they were seven in number and just for the ministry of the table. In all these, only one is normative: the election of other brethren to serve in the house of the Lord. One could recollect the story of an elderly minister who refused to allow the church to elect women as deacons because according to him "no woman was in the Acts 6 list!" Also these are churches who will never appoint any number below or above the number 7. One can say with all certainty that these practices are not normative and they may not be repeatable also as there is no other place in the New Testament where only seven people are appointed as 'deacons'.

The fourth historical precedence is the quality of the men appointed as leaders. They were of good reputation, full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. You can say that while this list is not normative, when the church wanted to appoint Barnabas to go and lead the Antiochene Church, he was said to possess the same qualities too. These qualities also may not be at variance with those detailed in the analysis of 1 Timothy 3:8-10.

With all these, no one will likely disagree that the hermeneutical process of the book of Acts is a complex one!

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit you have learnt about the historical nature of the book of Acts. You have seen that despite Luke's interest in the history of the early church he was selective in his choice of materials and subjective because he was part of the history.

You have also learnt that since the book of Acts is the volume two of the single work Luke-Acts, the purpose is the continuation of that of Luke. The book of Acts is concerned with the growth of Christianity geographically and racially. And the structure of the book suits the purpose. The issue of historical precedent was also explained. The resolution of the issue lies in the observation that the only things that could be binding on the church are those things that are normative.

5.0   Summary

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- Acts is the only historical book in the New Testament as it traces the development of the early church after Jesus' ascension.

- Luke's use of material is selective.
- Luke's use of material is subjective since he was part of the history.
- The purpose of Acts is to trace the development of Christianity geographically and racially.
- Doctrinal statements in Acts can be classified as Christian theology, Christian history and Christian experience and practices
- There are also two levels of expression: the primary and the secondary.
- Normative commands are those that the narratives intend to teach.
- Christian experience and practice may not be repeatable except it is repeated elsewhere in the New Testament or it is in harmony with what is taught elsewhere.

Self-Assessment Exercise

1.   What do you understand by historical precedence and how does it affect hermeneutics in Acts?
2.   What are the steps to take in interpreting the book of Acts?

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UNIT 4: Interpreting The Epistles

Content

1.0   Introduction

In the previous unit, we examined the interpretation of the book of Acts. We have looked into the historical quality of the book, especially its selective and subjective nature. You have also examined the issue of historical precedence and the principles to use in making precedence normative for the contemporary church. In this unit however, our attention will be shifted to the most populous genre of the Bible: the epistles. In this unit, you will examine the nature of the epistles and the steps that you will need to follow in interpreting epistles. We will then conclude with a practical application based on 1 Timothy 1:13-14. I welcome you to this unit again. Happy Reading!

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Explain the meaning of epistles
- Divide any epistle according to its epistolary structure
- Discuss the nature of the epistle
- List the steps in interpreting the epistles
- Interpret any passage of the epistles

3.0   Main Content

3.1   Introducing the Epistles

In the New Testament, the Epistles form the largest literary genre available. In fact, apart from the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles and Revelations, all others are to be regarded as epistles. Thus the epistles of the Bible include 1 and 2 Corinthians; Romans; Galatians; Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; Philemon; 1 and 2 Thessalonians; 1 and 2 Timothy; Titus; Hebrews; James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. On the surface, the epistles appear so easy to interpret but in reality they are difficult to interpret. In order to understand the nature of the epistles properly, some introductory studies should be done.

What is an epistle? The word epistle is derived from Greek word *epistole* and it denotes a letter of any kind. Harrop (1962) says "it is originally simply a written communication between persons apart, whether personal and private or official." Vlach identifies epistles as "letters written to an individual, group, or public audience." He goes on to comment that though "some have made a distinction between ancient letters and epistles. Technically, a letter was written to a specific person or person and not for the public in general. In contrast, an epistle was an artistic literary form that was intended for the public."

3.2   The Epistolary Structure

Just as there is a form that letters take in the modern day, so also do the epistles have a fixed form. Any epistle can be divided into the following parts:

1.   Address – this includes name of writer and the recipient.
2.   Greetings
3.   Thanksgiving or prayer wish

4.   The body of the epistle
5.   Closing – which includes final greetings and farewell

You need to know however that though this is the standard form of the structure of the epistle, there are variations. For example, the thanksgiving or prayer wish may be omitted entirely as Paul did in the epistle to the Galatians. You would also note that James and 2 Peters lack the personal touch of a letter and the familiar greetings. Because Paul is credited with most of the epistles, it would be appropriate to use a Pauline epistle to illustrate the roles of the parts of epistles in understanding or interpreting epistles.

If 1 Corinthians is analysed based on the aforementioned epistolary structures, the following becomes apparent:

a.   Opening address: 1:1-2 states that the letter is written by Paul in conjunction with Sosthenes to the church of God in Corinth.

b.   Greetings: 1:3 In this section, the intimate relationship between the writers and recipients is emphasized and also expanded to include all other churches of God.

c.   Thanksgiving – 1:4-9: Paul thanked God for the enrichment of the Corinthian Church in spiritual gifts, speech and knowledge. One has to note that Paul did not deny anything he has written here – it was an accurate reflection of Paul's view of the Church and not flattery as some scholars indicate.

d.   The Body of the letter 1:10 – 16:3: As one reads this section, it is important to observe a few things:

     i.   The disclosure formula of the body of the letter. In 1 Corinthian, this is "I beseech you, brothers".

     ii.   The formula that introduces the different subjects that were discussed. In 1 Corinthians, it is the construction "now concerning". This is used 7 times in the 1Corinthians epistle. Six out of these seven times, it is used to introduce new subjects. The seventh usage is in 7:25 where the argument only takes a new turn.

e.   Closing – 1Cor. 16:19-20. The greetings here disclosed a network of relationship between the writers, the recipients and those connected with them even outside the borders of Corinth. This buttressed the opinion that the intimate relationship between the Church and the writer of the epistle in the greetings was expanded to include all other churches of God.

If one is able to get this divisions set, one will make the understanding of the epistle easy.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Discuss the epistolary structure using any epistle of your choice.

3.3   The Nature of the Epistles

The most important thing that you have to understand about the nature of the epistles is the fact that they are "occasional documents". While not robbing the epistles of their status as being inspired by God, their occasional nature must be taken serious. Explaining this, Fee and Stuart (1993) has this to say:

> This means that they were occasioned, or called forth, by some special circumstance, either from the reader's side or the author's. Almost all of the New Testament letters were occasioned from the reader's side… Usually the occasion was some kind of behaviour that needed correcting, or a doctrinal error that needed setting right, or a misunderstanding that needed further light.

As a result of this nature, there is always an application problem in the interpretation of the epistles. Most of the time what we have are answers to the problem whose question are not known.

Another thing that one needs to be aware of is the fact that the epistles are not theological compendia. One has to state that though theology is implied but that kind of theology is called "task theology", that is theology that is brought to bear on a particular problem or situation (Fee and Stuart, 1993). Therefore to set theology at the instance of few passages of the epistles may be problematic.

Self-Assessment Exercise

What do you understand by the term 'occasional document'? What is its implication for the interpretation of the epistles?

3.4   Steps in Interpreting the Epistles

Unravel the Historical Context

The understanding of the historical context of the epistles is of a greater importance than the Gospels. For example, as discussed earlier, the epistles are "occasional documents". Thus, it becomes important to have a grasp of the occasion that gave birth to the document. Using 1 Corinthians again, as our example, you would need to ask: what was happening in the Corinthians Church that warranted the writing of the epistle? How did Paul come to know about the situation? What had been the previous relationship between Paul and the Corinthian Church? What was Paul's attitude in the letters?

The main question to ask now is: How then can we lay our hand on this information? To get this information, one must consult a Bible Dictionary and glean as much information as we can about the city of Corinth and the Church. This will furnish us with what the general situation of Church was.

Determine the Purpose of the Epistle

After the historical context has been determined, the next thing to do is to examine the purpose of the epistle. Why was the epistle written? This is important because the author's choice of word and style would be largely determined by his purpose. Also, the whole structure of the epistle will be geared towards the attainment of the goal. Firstly, this could be ascertained by consulting Bible Commentaries. Most Bible Commentaries would attempt to state the purpose of the author of a particular epistle. Secondly, you can do a personal study of the epistle. As you seek to interpret a passage of the epistle, you need to read the whole epistle over and over again. As you read the epistle, you should take note of the following things:

- What the epistle says about the recipients
- The author's attitude as revealed in the epistle
- The specific things mentioned about the specific occasion, and
- The natural divisions of the letter.

As you take note of this, the purpose of the letter would become clear.

Determine the periscope

The next thing to do is to isolate the periscope or passage or paragraph that you want to interpret. After this, you need to determine the relationship of

the paragraph to earlier and subsequent paragraphs. This will help you to grasp the function of the passage or the argument or the thinking of the author.

For example, if you want to interpret 1 Corinthians 13, to understand chapter 13 you will have to follow the whole of Paul's argument from 1 Corinthians 12 to 14. This is because 1 Corinthians 13:13b which reads: "And I show you a still more excellent way" is the linker statement between 1 Corinthians 13 and the phrase "pursue love," of 1 Corinthians 14:1. The inability of some scholars to see the link between chapters 12 to 14 has led some to say that 1Corinthians 13 is an interpolation which really did not belong here. If however, you are able to read all these at a stretch taking note of the link phrases you would be able to overcome many interpretation obstacles.

Watch out for the author's peculiarity

This factor becomes more glaring in the epistles than any other genre of the Bible literature. As it has been pointed out in the first part, Paul was one given to wild digressions, that is, a parenthetical passage that can take even two to three chapters. If you are not clear about this style, you will not know when the author is using it and you can easily misinterpret the passage.

Do your exegesis

After all preliminary work has been done; you can proceed on the exegesis of the passage, especially, the lexical-syntactical analysis. This is because it is important to first determine the message of the text to the original recipient before embarking on the application of the passage to today's context. This is because as the hermeneutical principle states, a passage cannot mean today what it has never meant to its author and his readers.

Having determined the message, apply the message

The second hermeneutical principle states that "whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e., similar specific life situation) with the first – century setting, God's word to us is the same as his word to them. However you have to be careful at this point because it is still possible to misapply the message even though you actually get the original message.

3.5   Practical Application: 2 Timothy 1:3-14

It is generally accepted that this epistle was written by Paul to Timothy. This is stated in the opening address. The division of this epistle to the epistolary formula would look like this:

Opening Address:	2 Tim. 1:1-2a
Greetings	2 Tim. 1:2b
Thanksgiving	2 Tim. 1:3-12
The Body	2 Tim. 1:13-4:18
Closing	2 Tim. 4:19-22

Now, let us determine the historical circumstances.

The Recipient

Who is Timothy that is named as the recipient of this epistle? It is no gainsaying that Timothy was Paul's convert. Apart from being Paul's convert, he had been Paul's faithful missionary companion having travelled with him for some time. He was with Paul during the second and third missionary trips. He has also been entrusted with special assignments. It looked as if after the first imprisonment was over, Paul left Timothy in Ephesus with the following responsibilities:

> to combat the heretics who were troubling the church there to order the church's worship, to select and ordain its elders, to regularize the relief and ministry of its widows, to command and teach the apostolic faith, together with the moral duties which flow from it (Stott, 1973).

Considering the personality of Timothy, these duties seem heavy for him to undertake. This is because as it can be deduced from the scriptures, Timothy was:

(i) A very young man: In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul told him not to allow anyone to despise his youth and in 2 Timothy 2:22 Paul asked him to shun youthful passions.

(ii) Prone to illness: In 1 Timothy 5:23, Paul advised Timothy to "use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your *frequent ailments*". (Italics mine)

(iii) A very timid person: In Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1Corinthians 16:10, 11), Paul had to prepare the way for Timothy's mission by asking the Corinthians to put him at ease in their midst.

What was the circumstance that led to 2 Timothy?

As at the time this letter was written, Paul was already a prisoner whose martyrdom was doubly sure. The State in the person of Emperor Nero was determined to stamp out Christianity. Heretics appeared to be on the increase, snuffing the life out of the apostolic teachings and as 2 Timothy 1:15 indicates, there was an almost total Asian departure from Paul's teachings. Also Moule (1905) described the situation then, Christianity was on the verge of total annihilation. It was in this state that Paul remembered Timothy. He saw in Timothy a loyal, faithful and persevering partner who can be entrusted with the message of Christianity. Thus, the purpose of the epistle is to let Timothy be aware of the responsibility he has. This is because as the last of the Apostles, who was facing his death, Paul was kind of handing over the baton of the ministry to Timothy who will now have the responsibility of defending the gospel, that is, the apostolic teachings.

Having got a good picture of the circumstances that led to the writing of the epistle and its purpose, one can now proceed to the exegesis of the passage:

v.13: Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.

In this verse, the following words are central to the understanding of the thought: retain, standard and sound words.

Retain: the Greek word translated 'retain' actually means 'hold'. It conveys the picture of taking a firm grip of something in such a way that it will not slip away.

Standard: this word comes first in the Greek text, hence it receives great emphasis. The emphasis on this word shows the importance which Paul attached to it. The word has two possible meanings:

i. Guthrie (1970) translates the word as **outline.** He writes that "it means an outline sketch such as an architect might make before getting down to the detailed plans of a building." To take this as its meaning in this sense is quite improbable because its meaning would not fit into the context. As Stott (1973) asserts, it would mean that Paul is telling Timothy that he "must amplify, expound and apply the apostle's teaching."

ii. Arndt and Gingrich (1952) in their Greek – English lexicon said that the usual meaning of the word is 'model' or 'example'

(This position is corroborated by L. Goppelt (1992) in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*). He went on to suggest that in 1 Timothy 1: 16 the word is used to mean "prototype' while in 2 Timothy 1:13 it means 'standard'. This is likely to suit the context better, because it implies that "Paul's teaching is to be Timothy's guide or rule. He is not to depart from it. He is to follow it, better to hold it fast".

Sound words: The word 'sound' is same as the word used in the Gospels for the people that Jesus has healed. Thus the picture here is that the teaching that Paul had taught Timothy are not in any way defective or deceased – they are 'whole' and healthy. So, the complete thought here is that Timothy must make sure that the words which he has received from Paul which are healthy and sound when he received them must be held in that state. They are not to be contaminated in any form, hence Paul used them in the imperative – it is a command, it is incumbent on Timothy to keep the word safe.

v.14: Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure
which has been entrusted to you.
This verse seems to be a repetition of the earlier verse except for the additional specific words used. The key words here are guard, treasure and entrusted.

Guard: this word imports the sense of guarding something so that it is not lost or damaged. In Luke 11:21, it is used to mean guarding a palace against marauders and possession against thieves asin Acts 22:20.

Treasure: the word translated 'treasure' here can also be translated to mean 'the truth' as in the Revised Standard Version or 'good thing' as in the King James' Version. In any way, it is the 'sound words' of v. 13 that has been rendered thus.

Entrusted: suggests that a treasure has been put in the charge of another person with the hope that it would be kept safe. It suggests an assurance that it is safe wherever it is kept. It is the same word that is used for the keeping of money in banks.

The additional picture we can glean here is that as the strong man guards his house against thieves or marauder so is Timothy to guard the gospel that has been entrusted to him. He is to make sure that nothing happens to the gospel. As Stott (1973) indicates, "there were heretics abroad, bent on

corrupting the gospel and so robbing the church of the priceless treasure which had been entrusted to it. Timothy must be on the watch."

Hermeneutical Application

The Christendom faces the greatest danger of survival from within – heretical teaching that threatens the very life of the Church. It is now incumbent upon the faithful witness to guard the gospel that they have received so that we will not allow the ware of heresy to erode the faith away.

 Like Timothy, the Church needs to retain the standard of the sound words that they have heard. This message becomes more powerful if delivered to a group of ministers. For example, the pressure on the ministers today is such as to make them conform to the tune of the pew. It is only the ones who know their calling that has not taken away from the soundness of the treasure that has been deposited with them.

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit you have studied how to interpret the epistles. You have learnt that the epistles are a written communication between persons apart whether personal and private or official. You have also learnt that epistles have a five-form structure consisting of address, greeting, thanksgiving or prayer wish, the body and the closing. You have also learnt that epistles by their nature are occasional documents in that their being written was due to some special circumstances either from the readers' or the author's side. You have also learnt that as a result of this occasional nature, the historical context of the epistles are important in the process of interpretation. The historical context includes authorship, recipients and purpose.

5.0   Summary

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- The word 'epistles' is derived from the Greek word '*epistole*' which refers to a written communication between persons apart, whether personal and private or official.
- An epistle has a five-form structure consisting of address, greeting, thanksgiving or prayer wish, the body and the closing.

- Epistles are occasional documents in that they were called into being as a result of some special circumstances either from the readers' or the author's side.
- Epistles are not theological compendia. Though theology is implied in the epistles, they are called task theology, that is, theology brought to bear on a particular problem,

Self-Assessment Exercise

1.   Using 1 Corinthians as an example, discuss the epistolary structure.
2.   What are the steps to take in interpreting the epistles?

6.0   References/Further Readings

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UNIT 5:   Interpreting Revelation

CONTENT

1.0   Introduction

I welcome you to this unit which is going to be the last unit in this course. In the previous unit, you have studied about the epistles, the nature of the epistle as an occasional document and the implication for this in interpretation. In this unit, you would be focusing on another genre of the New Testament, the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is the only book in its genre and is the most difficult book when it comes to interpretation. Even in preaching, it is not uncommon to see pastors avoiding preaching from it and those who do may focus only on chapters 1 to four and then jump to chapter 20 to 21. Others that attempt preaching or

teaching from the remaining chapters do so at the risk of heresies. This, I promise you, is going to be a rewarding unit.

2.0   Intended Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Define apocalyptic literature
- Discuss the characteristics of apocalyptic literature
- Evaluate the nature of Revelation vis-à-vis apocalyptic literature
- Discuss the approaches to the interpretation of Revelation
- Discuss the steps to take in interpreting Revelation

3.0   Main Content

3.1   Introducing the Book of Revelation

As I have said earlier, the book of Revelation is the most difficult of all the books of the New Testament. The peculiarity of Revelation makes it also the most neglected and the worst misinterpreted book in the Bible. Ashcraft (1972) has this to say about Revelation:

> It is so difficult for most modern readers that they neglected it altogether. But many who do not ignore the book do something even worse; they misuse it. Sometimes the misuse is nothing more serious than an exaggeration of unimportant details. Sometimes, however, the central message is overlooked or obscured.

To be able to interpret Revelation accurately, one has to understand the factors that has made it so peculiar and understand its nature and this is what will be tackled first. The first thing to grasp is that unlike 2 Timothy or 1 Corinthians which is a real letter that is described as 'occasional document' Revelation "is a letter, a drama, a prophecy and an apocalypse, all in one" (Ashcraft, 1972). The awareness of these would definitely be of great help to interpret. Out of all these however, it is the apocalyptic and prophetic nature that are prominent followed by its nature as an epistle and these shall be considered briefly.

3.2   Revelation as an Apocalyptic Book

Before Revelation is considered as an apocalyptic literature, it is necessary to define what an apocalyptic literature is and identify its characteristics.

Definition of Apocalyptic Literature

The English word 'apocalypse' is a direct transliteration of the Greek word '*apokalypsis*'. The title 'Revelation' was derived from the Latin word 'revelatio' which has the same meaning with the Greek apokalypsis, that is "to uncover". Apocalyptic literature can be defined as "a highly stylized form of literature, with its own conventions of symbolism and terminology, continually feeding on Old Testament sources. It is a literature of dreams and visions, often centred on a vision of the heavenly throne room" (Bauckham, 1962). In other words, apocalyptic literature is highly different from any form of literature largely because of its uses of special symbolism and terminology.

Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

1. It is mostly pseudonymous: this is to say that it is written under false name. The writers usually write from the 'standpoint of a previous age and penned their books in the names of great religious leaders of the past" like Adam (Burney, 1989). Thus, apocalyptic literature is presented like secret information given to those past historic leaders and kept for future generations.

2. A pessimistic appraisal of contemporary culture: they see evil prevailing. It looks as if evil has triumphed over God's people and that demonic powers seemed to be in charge.

3. A transcendent view of God: in apocalyptic literature it seems as if Gods had withdrawn from the world and the events occurring there. It presents a remote view about God.

4. A presentation of two ages: in apocalyptic literature two ages are always presented. The first one is the present age which is seen as evil and the second age is the age to come which would belong to God. This future age is sometimes seen as already in existence in heaven.

5. A dualistic eschatological view: it pictures that the world as coming to an end via a cosmic conflict. There is a picture of war between God (with his forces) and Satan (with his forces). However, the ultimate victory belongs to God.

6. Prevalence of mystery and secrecy: in apocalyptic literature, the author is seen as receiving mystery message through angelic messengers and often taken to heaven on a journey. They were often commanded to write and seal their books. Generally, only the initiated could know the mystery.

7. Heavy use of symbolism: mostly animal symbolism is used apart from other types of symbolism. "They used the animals known to them and often created new animals by combining parts of existing animals" (Ashcraft, 1972).

Having tackled the first two issues, we can now face the question: is Revelation an apocalyptic book? To answer this question adequately, one has to compare Revelation with apocalyptic literature. A look at Revelation will reveal the following:

a. **Revelation is pessimistic about contemporary culture:** one could see John saying that evil is reigning in contemporary culture.
b. **Revelation presents a dualistic eschatology:** John also presents a war between evil forces and God forces with the view that God will triumph ultimately.
c. **Revelation used apocalyptic symbolism:** there is the heavy use of symbols and animal imageries as characteristic of apocalyptic literature. It also used symbols of angels and demonic beings, heavenly bodies, animal imagery and numerology.

Despite these similarities, a lot of differences exist between Revelation and apocalyptic literature. The following are to be noticed.

Unlike apocalyptic literature, Revelation is not pseudipigraphical. The author identified himself as John which is his own name and wrote to the people who lived in his contemporary culture.

In Revelation, the view of suffering as that over which man has no control and it is directed against him by the evil ones is not evident. Rather, suffering is viewed as that which man is able to overcome via obedience to Christ.

Though the dualistic language is present in Revelation, it has been greatly modified. All through, the sovereignty of God is asserted and never questioned. God is not presented as remote, "there is not hint that God is removed from or disinterested in the world" (Ashcraft, 1972). As a result

of this, the view of history presented in Revelation is more optimistic than pessimistic.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Revelation is an apocalyptic book. Discuss.

3.4   Revelation as a Prophetic Book

If you would remember, we have said that prophecy in the biblical sense do not mean foretelling but forth-telling. It is actually "speaking God's message to the people of the prophet's own time, interpreting God's will for them in light of then current historical events" (Bratcher, 2008). If you look at Revelation from the light of this definition, you will discover that it fits in more as a prophetic book. In fact in chapter 3:1, the author referred to the book as prophecy. The verse reads, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy."

3.5   The Nature of Revelation

Having come to the conclusion that Revelation is not hundred percent apocalyptic and that is shared more the qualities of a prophetic book, we should now consider the nature of the book. While we are not overlooking the fact that John called his book an apocalypse, and that Revelation shared many characteristics with apocalyptic literature, it is not an apocalyptic literature per se. You need to remember that John also called this book a prophetic book. In fact, "the prophetic elements in Revelation is even stronger that the apocalyptic" elements (Vawter, 1960). So, we can conclude that Revelation can be "described as an 'apocalyptic – prophetic' book composed in the form of a letter to "the seven churches in Asia" (Burney, 1989). Apart from these two overriding elements, you must also remember that Revelation is also an epistle in that it is a letter written to the seven churches of Asia.

3.6   The Historical Situation of Revelation

Occasion and Purpose

As indicated earlier, the determination of the occasion and purpose helps in the interpretation of a book and this is what we are now set to do.

1. **The Persecution:** that the internal evidence suggests a climate of persecution is clear in Revelation. John was in exile himself

(1:9), one person had been martyred in the Pergamum church (2:13), others were warned of impending persecution (2:10, 3:10) and Rome is said to be drunk with the blood of martyrs (17:6). Some extra -biblical sources also like Clement of Rome (1 Clem. 1, 1: v) and Tertullian (Apology V) confirms this.

2. **Emperor Worship:** there are indirect references to the worship of the Emperor in Revelation. For example, he referred to the beast and its image and those who worship it (13:4, 11, 12, 17; 14:9, 11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). It has been ascertained historically that emperor worship started with Julius Caesar and various emperors had various attitudes to it ranging from neglect to indifference to legal enforcement.

3. **Heresy in the Seven Churches:** it is clear that John condemned certain errors which had crept into the churches of Asia. He referred to the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15), the teaching of Balaam (2:14) which are clear indications of heresies.

Having determined the circumstances that surrounds the writing of Revelation, the purpose now can be inferred. There was threatened persecution which can be easily connected with the growing emperor worship. Along with this, heretical views began to enter into the churches. Thus one can assert that the purpose of Revelation is two fold:

(a) To encourage the Christians to stand firm in the midst of persecution, and,
(b) To combat the heresy that was creeping into some of the churches.

Date

The date of the writing of this book would be of great help to an interpreter. Of all suggested dates, only two dates are in serious contention: A. D. 95 and about A.D. 70. However, in my view, A.D. 95 would fit the period of the reign of Domitian. For the following reasons, the Domitian reign is favoured:

1. It was only during the reign of Domitian that the persecution of Christians was extended to the Roman province of Asia.
2. Revelation 13:3 and 17:8 seems to reflect the Nero redivivus myth (which states that Nero would come to life again to lead on army

of Parthians against Rome). If this is so, a date after Nero's death would be required.

3. Revelation 6:6 may be a reflection of a Domitian edict of A.D. 92 which was aimed at increasing grain production by destroying half of all the vineyards.

4. External evidences, also strongly favour a date during the Domitian reign. Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*, v.30 and Eusebius in *Church History,* III. 18 accept that Revelation was written during Domitian's reign.

3.7   Approaches to the Interpretation of Revelation

That nature of the interpretations given to Revelation so far demands a knowledge and analysis of the methods that have been used in the bid to interpret Revelation. This section would briefly discuss what each approach is and state its weaknesses and or strengths.

The Preterist Approach

This approach is also called the contemporary – historical approach. This approach holds that John wrote for his own generation. As far as this approach is concerned, references to the future concern John's immediate future and not ours. This belief was started by Luis de Alcasar as a counter understanding to the continuous-historical approach.

Advantage: it recognizes the fact that the historical setting of the book is of great importance in the understanding of the book.

Disadvantage: it leaves little or no room for the application of he message of Revelation to today's Church. This approach tends to limit the message of Revelation to the author's time.

The Continuous-historical Approach

This approach sees Revelation as a detailed forecast of the history of the Church in its successive stages. Talking about this approach, Burney (1989) says, "the churches of Asia (chapters two and three) are often viewed as symbolic of the ages of church history". Let us examine an interpretation from one of those who holds this view. U. Smith (1907) writing on the 7 churches to which John wrote, states:

Only a small portion of the book could have personally concerned the seven churches, or any of the Christian of John's days; for the events it brings to view were mostly so far in the future as to lie beyond the lifetime of the generation then living, or even the time during which those churches would continue; and consequently they could have no personal connection with them.

Having, thus, set aside the local churches mentioned, he interpreted the church of Ephesus as follows:

The first church named is Ephesus. According to the application here made, this would cover the first, or apostolic age of the church. The definition of the word Ephesus is desirable; which may well be taken as a good descriptive term of the character and condition of the church in its first state.

One could see that this application is wild and untrue to the text. Though this approach is no longer popular today, it was commonly held by many of the major Protestants. Those who have held this position include: John Knox, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley.

Advantage: this approach recognizes the fact that the message of Revelation is relevant to every age.

Disadvantages: the first thing to notice is that it sets aside the historical setting of the book, thus making it vulnerable to all fanciful interpretations.

The second falls in line because once the historical setting has been set aside, it allows the interpreter to force the symbols to have meanings foreign to their context.

Finally, it has led to the calculation of times and period of the return of Jesus Christ – an idea the scripture has spoken against.

The Futurist Approach

As the name implies, this approach sees the events and visions of Revelation as concerned primarily with the end of age. It sees Revelation as entirely eschatological. One has to state, however, that most of those who hold this view concede that Revelation 1- 3 reflects the author's own days. This is the most dominant view today and some of those who hold

the view are J. N. Darby, Scofield and Hal Lindsey among others. It takes a more literal approach to the book and ignores the symbolism more often than not.

Advantage: it sees the relevance of Revelation for every age.

Disadvantage: it seems to say that the book has no message for its original readers.

The Idealist Approach

This is also called the Timeless Symbolic approach. It is a non-literal approach that holds that the visions recorded in the book do not point to a particular period. While it agrees that the setting of the book is the first century church, it states that the book contains a message that transcends that setting.

The Apocalyptic – Prophetic approach

This approach attempts to take seriously the apocalyptic as well as the prophetic characteristic of Revelation. It recognizes that "Revelation is apocalyptic in that it makes use of the form and language of apocalyptic. It is prophetic in that it speaks out of the situation in the time of the writer, has relevance for people of all ages, and looks forward to the full realization of the plan and purpose of God"

Advantages

- It places Revelation in its historical setting
- It recognizes its relevance to the original readers.
- It recognizes its relevance to the modern readers
- It recognizes its symbolic nature and calls for symbolic interpretation.

This approach seems to be the most recommended of all the approaches and it shall be the approach that would be used here.

I would want you to know that apart from the last approach which is currently gaining ground, the others are held based on the theological leaning of the people.

Briefly explain all the methods that have been used in interpreting Revelation citing their weaknesses and strengths.

3.8   Steps in Interpreting Revelation

So far, the jungle that may make the interpretation of Revelation enigmatic for the interpreter has been cleared. So, we can now proceed to the steps to be taken in the process of interpretation. However, you should know that apart from the apocalyptic nature, what is true of the epistles is also true here.

Isolate individual oracles

You have to recognize this prophetic quality of Revelation. It is better to take the visions as a whole and see the details as secondary. Unless this is done, interpretation would be marred. You have to avoid the overemphasizing of details that can snuff the life out of good exegesis. Fee and Stuart (1993) says:

> The whole vision is trying to say something; the details are either (1) for dramatic effect (6:12-14) or (2) to add to the picture of the whole so that the readers will not mistake the points of reference (9:7-11). Thus the details of the sun turning black like sackcloth and the stars falling like late figs probably do not "mean" anything. They simply make the whole vision of the earthquake more impressive. However, in 9:7-11 the locust with crowns of gold, human faces and women's long hair help to fill out the picture in such a way that the original readers could hardly have mistaken what was in view-the barbarian hordes at the outer edges of the Roman empire.

When you collect and interpret visions and oracles as a whole, you would not get bogged down where minute details are of no importance.

Determine the meaning of the symbols used

The next thing to do is to ascertain the meaning of the symbols used in the passage to be interpreted. Here again, you have to be cautious because a wrong interpretation of a symbol would definitely lead to a wrong

interpretation. What then could be done to ascertain the meaning of a particular symbol?

i. Be familiar with the source of the symbolism. John has derived his symbols from the Old Testament and even Greek mythology. However, you have to ascertain that John has not transformed them because sometimes "they have been broken and transformed under inspiration and this blended together into this new prophecy" (Fee and Stuart, 1993).

ii. There are some symbols that are universal in their meaning and such universal meanings must be used unless otherwise stated. For example, the beast mostly is used for a ruler of an empire or the ruler and the empire. Again we have to be cautions of some symbols that are fluid. For example, the Lion of the tribe of Judah is also the Lamb (Rev. 5:5-6). Such images are to be respected.

iii. One final rule here is that "when John himself interprets his images, these interpreted images must be held firmly and must serve as a starting point for understanding others" (Fee and Stuart, 1993).

Some of these include the golden lampstands which are identified as the seven churches (1:20), the seven stars as the seven angels (1:20) and the great dragon which is identified as Satan (12:9).

Apart from these steps to help you in determining the meaning of the symbol that has been used you also need to be cautious so that no symbol would be interpreted outside its context. Lowery (2007) says:

When interpreting any symbol in Revelation, we must evaluate the images in light of layers of context: (a) The symbol may be a part of a cluster of symbols when taken together the sum is greater than the parts; (b) The symbol, perhaps as part of a cluster of symbols, must be interpreted in light of the larger unit(s) in which it appears; and (c) The symbol's contribution to the overall context of Revelation must be discerned (For example, often a symbol in one passage surfaces again in a later passage, perhaps more fully developed.

Determine the Literary Context of the Passage

Determining the literary context of a passage means that you have to determine the literary function of the passage in line with the preceding and the subsequent chapters. This will allow you to see the flow of thought of the writer. For example, Rev. 1-3 is the letter to the seven churches and gives us a picture of John's contemporary age. Anyone who wants to interpret Revelation 4 has to understand it in line with 1-3 or else the main point would be missed. Let me give a brief hint here: Rev. 4 centres on the cosmic sovereignty of God which only becomes sharp against the persecution of the Christian church. Thus, it becomes a message to the church that no matter their situation, God is in absolute control.

Do an exegesis of the passage

When all the aforementioned activities have been done, what is next is for the interpreter to do an analysis or interpretation of the message. The first task here is to seek the author's original meaning. This is because, like the epistles, "the primary meaning of the Revelation is what John intended it to mean, which in turn must also have been something his readers could have understood it to mean" (Fee and Stuart, 1993).

At this point, the principle of application can be used to relate the message to the modern day church if it is applicable and draw the lessons to be taught from it.

3.7   Practical Application Revelation 13

Firstly, a good interpreter would discover that to interpret Chapter 13, he has to understand Chapter 12 because it is Chapter 12 that leads into Chapter 13.

Secondly, a textual problem arises which must be settled. In the RSV, the twelfth Chapter ends with the sentence: 'And he stood on the sand of the sea, "while in the KJV, the same sentence opens Chapter 13 and there it reads, "And I stood on the sand of the sea…" A lot depends on resolving this textual problem. While this is not an analysis of textual problem, one will agree with most scholars that:

> The RSV takes the correct reading to be **estathe** and translates "And he stood…," which relates the statement to the preceding verse. The KJV follows the variant reading **estathen** and translates "And I stood…" and relate the

statement to the following section. In the light of manuscript
evidence and the meaning in the context, the RSV translation
is preferable.

So, following the RSV, it is the dragon that stood by the seashore, thus "chapter thirteen contains a more detailed description of the activities of the dragon presented in chapter twelve." Having seen this, one could now proceed to interpret chapter 13.

Rev. 13:1-10 focuses on the beast from the sea, his activities and relationship to the dragon. The symbol of a beast is one of the universal symbols. It is used to mean kingdoms. The clue to this could be found in Daniel's use of four beasts to symbolize the Babylonian, Media, Persian and Greek kingdoms (Daniel 7). It is out of these four beasts that John created a composite beast. If this is true, then what John has done is to attribute to Rome the combined symbolism of the four kingdoms. On this Ashcraft (1972) writes:

> She had the disposition of the leopard, which was vigilant and
> fierce. She had the feet of the bear with power to crush. The
> mouth like a lion's mouth suggested the terrifying roar so
> dreaded by the shepherds of Palestine.

That the seven heads are meant to be rulers of the empire is clear from Rev. 17:10. So this will indicate that as at that time, Rome had about seven emperors. Also if the dragon has given the beast his power and authority, then it means that Rome derived her power from the devil who is bent on waging war against those who hold the testimony of Jesus (Ephesians 12:17).

It is to be noticed, however, that though the beast had power, it was not an ultimate power. What he did was that he was given permission to do (13:7) and it shall be for a time.

Rev. 13:11-15. This section focuses on the second beast. It comes from the land. He looked like a lamb but spoke like a dragon. This immediately suggests deception. From the description of his duty, he is to promote the worship of the 'ruler' (that is the first beasts). From this duty, the following action issues forth:
a. Those who refuse to worship the beast are to be killed.
b. There is the identification for those who worship the beast to allow them 'freedom' in the empire.
c. Those who did not, were given economic boycott.

Now, we have arrived at the area most misinterpreted: the number of the beast (666). One thing one has to know here is that John had just used a code name for the emperor of Rome to avoid trouble. Today, many people have been tagged 666 (for example, The Pope, Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin), but the most acceptable answer is Nero whose name would be Neron Kaiser.

This name numerically will in Hebrew add up to 666:

Nun	-	50
Resh	-	200
Waw	-	6
Nun	-	50
Qoph	-	100
Samech	-	60

This conclusion is buttressed by the use of Nero *redivivus* myth which is glaring in 13:3 and re-echoed in 13:12. This becomes more glaring in 17:10.

> John said there are seven kings, five have already fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come, and when he comes, he must remain a little while. And the beast which was, and is not, is himself also an eighth, and is one of the seven, and he goes to destruction.

Now, to understand this, let us look at Roman history up to Domitian:

Julius Caesar	died 44 BC
Augustus	31 BC – A.D. 14
Tiberius	A.D. 14 – 37
Galiqula	A.D. 37 – 41
Claudius	41 – 54
Nero	54 – 68
Galba	68 – 69
Otho	A.D 69
Vitellius	A.D. 69
Vespasian	69 – 79
Titus	79 – 81
Domitian	81 – 96

Out of these, Julius Caesar did not officially use the title emperor, so if the count begins from Augustus, Nero will be the fifth emperor. Since Galba, Otho and and Vitellius are regard as pretenders who never did rule as

emperors, they can be omitted from the list. If this is done, Domitian would be number eight and Titus would be number seven who 'remain a little while. Since the eighth is regard as being one of the seven, the message then is clear – Domitian is Nero incarnate.

Thus, the following are the lessons one can derive from Revelation 13:

1.   That the State may sue its devil inspired power and authority to wage war against Christianity.
2.   That in such cases, God still remained sovereign and He is still in control.
3.   That the devil can only do that which he is permitted to do by God.
4.   That persecution and trials will not be permanent. It will be only for a specific period of time.
5.   That in such periods, Christians are called to patient endurance and no active resistance.

4.0   Conclusion

In this unit, you have studied how to interpret the book of Revelation which happens to be the most enigmatic book of the New Testament. Tagged the apocalypse, Revelation is unique in its nature because it combined the qualities of an apocalyptic book, a prophetic book as well as an epistle. In order to understand the nature of Revelation as an apocalyptic book, you were taken through the characteristics of apocalyptic literature followed by an evaluation of Revelation. You were also taught that the historical context of the book is necessary for an accurate interpretation, thus you need to uncover issues of date, recipient and occasion and purpose. You were also taken through a brief survey of the methods that are being used in interpreting Revelation before an analysis of the steps that can be taken to interpret the book.

5.0   Summary

The following are the major points you have learnt in this unit:

- Revelation is derived from the Latin word '*revelatio*' which is used to translate Greek *apocalypse* which means to uncover.
- Apocalyptic literature is a highly stylized form of literature with its own conventions of symbolism and terminology continually feeding on Old Testament sources.
- Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy composed in the form of an epistle.

- The purpose of Revelation is to encourage Christians to stand firm in the midst of persecution and to combat heresy that was creeping into some of the churches.
- The preterist approach holds that John wrote for his own generation.
- The continuous-historical approach sees Revelation as a detailed forecast of the history of the church in its successive stages.
- The futurist approach sees the events and visions of Revelation as concerned primarily with the end of age.
- The apocalyptic-prophetic approach takes the nature of Revelation seriously.

Self-Assessment Exercise

1. Discuss the nature of the book of Revelation.
2. How would you interpret a passage of the book of Revelation?

6.0   REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS

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