

How to Study the Bible, 11/18/2018
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Discovering the author's purpose and plan

Each Bible book is a logically arranged and purposeful communication, not a collection of words (like a dictionary) or even a collection of paragraphs. It has structure and order. It starts somewhere and moves toward a goal. That goal is the author's intended message that the reader is supposed to grasp. To understand a Bible book we need to identify the subject and determine the author's development of thought (logical argument). The paragraph is the basic unit of the author's thought and his overall argument is developed in a series of paragraphs. The paragraphs are like individual pearls that are strung together to communicate the author's message. Once each paragraph is carefully studied the next step is to determine how the paragraphs relate to each other and how they communicate the author's intended message.

How to identify the subject, the central idea

1. What is introduced or emphasized in the opening paragraph? Authors frequently reveal what is uppermost in their mind at the very beginning. They have a reason for writing and a message to communicate. Acts, and Luke are prime examples. In the prophetic books of the Old Testament the historical context is usually given first followed by the focus or theme of the prophet's message, as in Micah 1:1ff, Amos 1:1, Joel 1:1ff, Nahum 1:1ff, etc.
2. Does the author state his purpose? John tells why he wrote his Gospel, "*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 20:30-31 Amos reveals the essence of his message when he defends his calling, Amos 3:7-9, 7:10-17.
3. If no purpose is stated, look for common ideas or elements that appear frequently. Authors repeat the central idea by using the same words or elements occurring in different situations. In Chronicles the temple is the unifying element as the temple is desired by David, built and dedicated by Solomon, and subsequently defiled and destroyed. In the Gospels the central idea is the purpose of Jesus' life and the author's plan centers around Jesus' words and works.
4. Is there a defining moment or significant turning point (pivot) in the narrative? In the synoptic Gospels the transfiguration and Peter's confession marks the turning point (Matthew 16:13-21; Mark 8:27-32; Luke 9:28-51). In John it is the resurrection of Lazarus and the arrest warrant for Jesus (John 11:56-57). David is at the pinnacle of his success in 1 Chronicles 17:1 when he conceives the plan to build the temple for God.
5. Is there a key statement in the book? In Judges the recurring statement, "*the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD,*" reveals the central issue is Israel's disobedience. That statement begins each cycle of oppression, repentance, and deliverance.
6. Test your proposed theme (central idea) by reading the book through to see if everything in the book supports and contributes to that central, unifying idea. If it does, you have identified the author's central idea. If it fails this test, review and revise your proposed theme.

How to find evidence of order

1. Look for change in the content itself. It may be a change in the subject, the characters, the action, or the location. Determine when, where, and how changes occur. For example: The two major sections of Matthew, 4:12 to 16:12 and 16:13 to 28:20, are distinguished by “*from that time Jesus began ...*”. In Acts 1:8 Jesus gives the disciples a mandate for their future witness that is built around a geographical progression (the witness is in Jerusalem, 1-7, in Judea and Samaria, 8-12, and to the “uttermost part of the earth” in 13-28).
2. Look for logical connectors. They may be as simple as “*but*” and “*then*” in Jonah. For example, *for this reason*, in Luke 7:47; in Ephesians, *as a result*, 4:14, and *therefore*, 4:25; *Finally then*, in 1 Thessalonians 4:1.
3. Repeated or parallel words or phrases may indicate divisions. For example, *now concerning* in 1 Corinthians 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1. Matthew records five extended discourses by Jesus, each concluding with, “*When Jesus had finished these words*” (7:18; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). In Judges, the phrase, “*the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD*” begins each new cycle (3:7, 12, 4:1, 6:1, etc.).
4. Apply logical principles and procedures. The Bible is a logical document, it was written for people and follows human thought processes. The idea is normally introduced, then explained, and then illustrated or applied. Likewise an event occurs and is followed by its consequences or an analysis of why it happened. The “*what*” usually precedes the “*why*” or the “*how?*”

Let's practice on the book of Jonah

1. Read each chapter as a separate unit of thought
2. What is the subject, the central idea that unites the four chapters?
3. What progression is evident (what changes occur in places or people, in ideas or action)?
4. How does the central idea develop (progress) through the chapters?

Jonah

1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.” But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. The Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten *it* for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep. So the captain approached him and said, “How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps *your* god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.” Each man said to his mate, “Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity *has struck* us.” So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, “Tell us, now! On whose account *has* this calamity *struck* us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?” He said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.” Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, “How could you do this?” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. So they said to him, “What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?”— for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy. He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm *has come* upon you.” However, the men rowed *desperately* to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming *even* stormier against them. Then they called on the Lord and said, “We earnestly pray, O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O Lord, have done as You have pleased.” So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging. Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.

2 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the stomach of the fish, and he said, “I called out of my distress to the Lord, And He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice. “For You had cast me into the deep, Into the heart of the seas, And the current engulfed me. All Your breakers and billows passed over me. “So I said, ‘I have been expelled from Your sight. Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple.’ “Water encompassed me to the point of death. The great deep engulfed me, weeds were wrapped around my head. “I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars *was* around me forever, But You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. “While I was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to You, Into Your holy temple. “Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness, but I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the Lord.” Then the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.

3 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.” So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk. Then Jonah began to go through the city one day’s walk; and he cried out and said, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered *himself* with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. He issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. “But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. “Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish.” When God saw their deeds that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity, which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do *it*.

4 But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, “Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my *own* country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. “Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.” The Lord said, “Do you have good reason to be angry?” Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city. So the Lord God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he became faint and begged with *all* his soul to die, saying, “Death is better to me than life.” Then God said to Jonah, “Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?” And he said, “I have good reason to be angry, even to death.” Then the Lord said, “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and *which* you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. “Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?” (NASB)