

Understanding an Epistle- week 6

2 Peter 3:16- 'hard to understand'

Find an example of a difficult passage and in a moment we will collect examples from around the room.

Format of an ancient letter-

1. The name of the writer
2. The name of the recipient
3. Greeting
4. Prayer wish or thanksgiving
5. Body
6. Final greeting or farewell

Look at some of the New Testament letters and see if you can identify this pattern. Can you find any letters that don't follow this pattern?

1. Who Wrote the letter?

Order of the NT- gospels, Acts, Pauline Epistles, General Epistles, Rev

Pauline Epistles- letters written by Paul

General Epistles- books written to a general audience

2 and 3 John are exceptions in that they are considered to be general epistles even though they are directed to a group of people (2 John) and Gaius (3 John).

Look at titles given to NT books...

With most of the books of the NT the author mentions their name at the beginning...

Pauline Literature- all have similar introductions that mention Paul

Hebrews- nothing.

James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude all have introductions that introduce the author

Only books where an author isn't mentioned at the beginning- Hebrews, and 1 John.

1 John has striking similarities to the gospel of John and 2 John.

2 and 3 John are written by 'the elder' which isn't really a person's name

Paul

What do we know about Paul? What are some things about Paul that you might suppose, but not be certain of?

Authorship of Hebrews

Hebrews is odd... placed just between Pauline lit and General epistles...

Hebrews 2:3 suggests it was someone who was not with Jesus, "... This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him."

Some attribute the book to Paul, but the author is unstated (all of the Pauline letters have an intro that is similar).

1 Peter 5:12- "... I have written to you briefly..." which is similar to Hebrews 13:22- "... I have written to you quite briefly."
Could it be Peter?

Doesn't have same type of Greek as Paul's other letters (although last 3 verses sound like Paul). Could Paul have written a general epistle? He was educated enough to write Hebrews. The last three verses could sound like Paul, but otherwise sound very different to his letters.

Leading ideas are Barnabas, Apollos... I wonder from the 'briefly' and the similar quality of Greek between 1 Peter and Hebrews if it was Silas... but we have little to go on.

Authorship of 1 and 2 Peter- Quality of the writing seems high for Peter, but it was written with Silas help (1 Peter 5:12). This also explains the roughness of 2 Peter when compared with the refined writing of 1 Peter.

James and Jude

Who wrote Jude?- Judah was a common Hebrew name... translated into Greek as Judas or Jude...two possible authors... 1. Apostle Judas- Lk 6:16, Acts 1:13 (not Judas Iscariot, but another apostle), or 2. Brother of Jesus Judas- Mt 13:55, Mk 6:3

Jude 17- separates himself from the apostles

Jude 1- calls himself a brother of James

Jude 1- “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James...”

Mark 3:20-21; 3:31-35- tension between Jesus family and himself

Acts 1:14- “They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.”

Were James and Jude the half-brothers of Jesus?

Mt 13:55/ Mark 6:3 (brothers named); John 7:3-10 (brothers taunting Jesus); Acts 1:14 (with early church)

1 Cor 9:5 (Lord’s brothers in the early church as known leaders); Gal 1:19 (James named as ‘the Lord’s brother’)

James a leader in the early church- apostle
James died too early (Acts 12:1-3)

Three James- James the Great (the apostle), James the lesser (the apostle), and James the just (the brother of Jesus)

James referred to in other parts of the NT

1 Cor 15:6-8, Gal 1:19, Gal 2:9, Acts 21:18, Acts 12:17 (Peter from prison... tell James), Acts 15:13.

James the Just was martyred in AD 62 as recorded by Josephus in Antiquities 20.9.1, "Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrim of judges, *and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned...*"

Could similarly explore Peter and John

2. Who is it written to?

Again look at the titles of the books...

Paul's letters are all titled based on who they are written to (Romans, place-ians, people that he wrote to)

Hebrews- odd one

Rest titled based on who it was written by (James, 1/2 Peter, 1/2/3 John, Jude).

Next notice who the letter is written to. This will sometimes raise some questions.

2 John- '...To the chosen lady and her children...'

James- '...To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations...'

Timothy- '...To Timothy my true son in the faith...'

Philemon- '...To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker...'

Hebrews- nothing.

1 Peter- '...To God's elect...'

1 John- nothing.

Hebrews- audience- Hebraic (Jewish) Christians

Look at a few chapters in Hebrews and find any examples of writing that would be for a Jewish Christian audience.

1 Peter

**Written to the *scattered*- diaspora- Acts 8:1/
8:4/ 11:19**

Has a metaphor within it of scattering seed

Has Jewish roots in being an exiled people- John
7:35- "... Will he go where our people live
scattered among the Greeks?..."

James 1:1- "...the twelve tribes scattered among
the nations"- likely Jewish Christians- the
scattered

1 Peter 1:1- "...To God's elect, exiles scattered
throughout the provinces of..."

1 Peter 2:11- "... I urge you, as foreigners and
exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which
wage war against your soul."

Only when we have properly understood the
letter as the recipients would have are we ready
to apply it to ourselves. Otherwise we are likely
to wrongly interpret it.

3. What is the situation or occasion for writing?

1 and 2 Thess- written from Corinth to talk about eschatological concerns (especially 2 Thess)- 'the day of the Lord', those who sleep, the Lord has not already come, the man of lawlessness, those who are idle and disruptive

Galatians- Big question- Should male non-Jewish Jesus followers be circumcised (and obey the Mosaic Law)?

What issues can you find Paul addressing in the book of 1 Corinthians?
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Persecution from outside- 1 Peter – dealing with persecution from outside the church, James- examples- James 1:2-4, 5:10-11, 1 Peter 1:6-7

Persecution from within- 2 Peter- dealing with false teaching inside the church, Jude

4. What cultural issues might make it more difficult for us to understand the letter? (cultural context)

It is important to distinguish between general principles for all time, and points that are particular to their culture (murder vs. eating food given over to idols).

How can we tell what principles are eternal and what are cultural?

Some examples- 1 Cor 11:14-15, 1 Cor 14:34-35, 2 Tim 4:13

5. To best understand the flow of an epistle (literary context)

1. Identify the problem and read in light of the main message that is being argued.
2. Figure out the point of each paragraph (read in paragraphs!)
3. Relate each paragraph to the problem
4. Ideally read the letter in a single sitting to notice the themes that are developed

6. What translation issues might be in this text? (language)

1. Check for footnotes (some translations will footnote possible alternative translations).
2. Compare a few different translations side by side.
3. Use a commentary that looks into how the original words and grammar are being used.
4. Learn biblical Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic (depending of the part of the Bible) to be able to study the Bible in the language it was written in.

Dealing with difficult passages

1. We don't build doctrine on passages that are uncertain- 1 Cor 15:29, 2 Peter 3:15-16, 1 Peter 3:18-22, 1 Peter 4:6
2. Note where the Bible is consistent and where it is not (don't build doctrine over a half verse).

3. Note if the writer had no other cultural choice (ex. slavery).
4. Be aware of the wider context (ex. Women lacking education).
5. Context, context, context!- Heb 6:4-6, 10:26-27- Historical context, literary context
6. Remember that we only have part of the picture. Sometimes knowledge was assumed that we don't have. Other times the writer is even answering specific questions or responding to situations without telling us what they are.
7. Even among uncertainty you can get the flow of a passage and find things that are meaningful.
8. When handling a difficult passage consult different translations and commentaries for help (ex. Hard Sayings of the Bible, The Bible Speaks Today Series).
9. Your first goal is to understand how the passage would have been originally understood before you apply it to yourself or others.
10. Cover this all with humility and grace. Understanding the Bible properly is a journey.