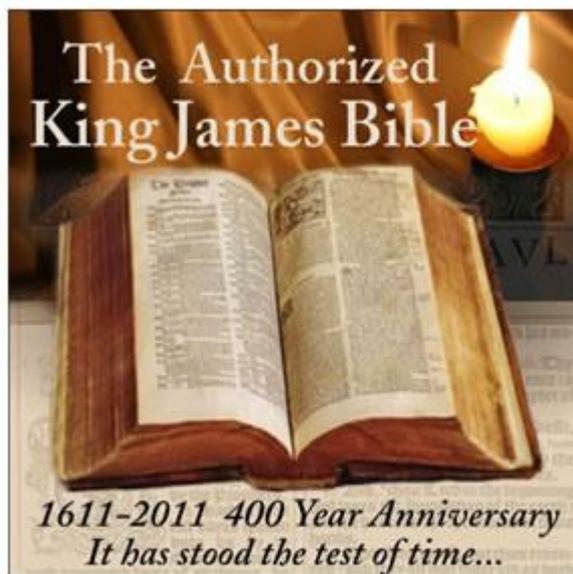


Some Keys to understanding the Bible

Dr Michael Jarvis

The Bible contains contributions from about 40 human authors spread over some 1,500 years. The writings contain historical records, poetry, life experiences of individuals, teachings about God, revelations from God, prophecies relating to future events. Some are human understandings of events they cannot explain. We even have a debate in which diverse views and contributions are recorded in the book of Job. The New Testament books are mainly accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus and expansion of these by his close followers after his death. There are also descriptions of the activities of the early Christian church, after they were empowered by their experience of the Holy Spirit.



Four hundred years ago King James set in motion a translation of the Bible into English and the result is still used by many Christians.

Since then there have been some relatively minor changes to the text, based on scholarly examination of other ancient copies of the scriptures, and updating the language to today's English.

However, translators sometimes spent much time discussing details and it **became clear that some scriptures had more than one possible meaning.**

The Bible tells us that *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16)* The Greek word used for 'inspiration' is *theopneustos* and it is more accurately translated as 'inspired by God' rather than 'God breathed'.

Passages such as this indicate that all the biblical writers were motivated by God to write and that whatever was written can in some way be beneficial to us in our relationship to God and in our understanding of his actions in the world throughout history.

Because some passages in the Bible can be interpreted in several ways this has led Bible scholars to realise that a basic principle of understanding the Bible is to compare scripture with scripture. It is not desirable to base our understanding on isolated verses that can prove to be out of context from the overall Bible message.

In addition, Psalm 19 reminds us that *'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge'* in other words, God does not only speak to us through the written scriptures or through his Holy Spirit. His creation is also meant to tell us something about his greatness and even about aspects of his character.

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Today, with the advance in scientific discoveries, this 'voice of God' has been greatly enlarged. It enables us to better understand some events recorded in the Bible, as seen and understood by the writers. The writers described these events but could not always know what caused them, except that they were used by God as part of his interactions with humanity.

We can list two of the 'keys' that can help us understand the Bible. There are other 'keys' that I am not considering here.

1. Comparing any one scripture with all other relevant scriptures.
2. Allowing the 'voice of God', speaking to us from his creation, to throw light on some events that were recorded in the Bible but which were only partially understood by the writers.

1. Comparing scripture with scripture

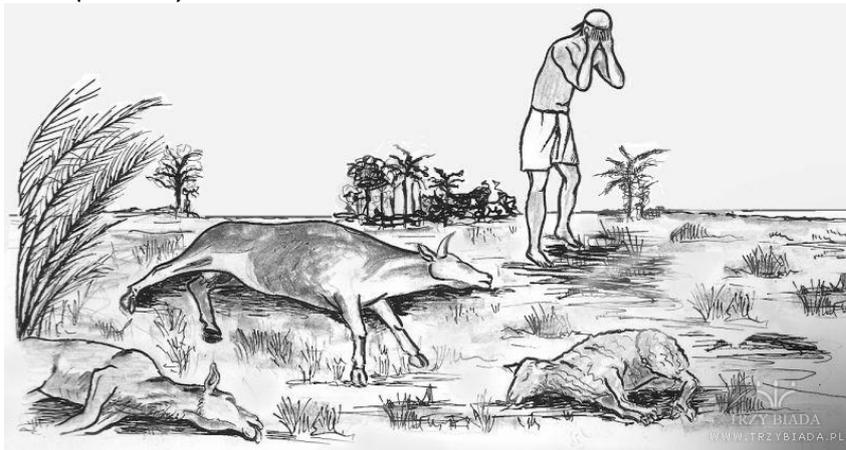
I have chosen just two examples out of many possible ones.

- a. The meaning of the word 'ALL' in the Bible.
- b. The words of Jesus relating to the 'End of this age'.

The meaning of the word 'ALL' in the Bible

It may come as a surprise to some that this small English word 'ALL' **does not always mean 'everything'** that is being referred to. For instance, consider the recorded 'plagues of Egypt'.

Exodus chapter 9 describes a plague that killed the animals. *'And the next day the Lord did it: **ALL the livestock of the Egyptians died**, but not one animal belonging to the Israelites died' (verse 6).*



However, a bit later we read about the plague of hail, *'therefore, at this time tomorrow I will send the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt, from the day it was founded till now. Give an order now to **bring your livestock** and everything you have in the field to a place of shelter, because the hail will fall on every man and animal that has not been brought in and is still out in the field, and they will die (verse 18-19). Throughout Egypt hail*

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struck everything in the fields – both men and animals; it beat down everything growing in the fields and stripped every tree. The only place it did not hail was in the land of Goshen, where the Israelites lived. (Verse 25-26)

Clearly not all the Egyptian animals died in the first plague since there were still others to die from the hail.

Then again, we read about the death of all the first born in Egypt. *'At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well (Exodus 12:29).*

Comparison of these three events clearly shows that the use of the word ALL did not mean 'everything' or 'all of the animals'. From the context it clearly means that 'some of all' the Egyptian animals died in the plague but 'none of all' the Israelite animals died'. We can therefore conclude that the use of the word ALL does not always mean what we often understand by this word.

In fact there are many places in the Bible where this word ALL does not mean 'everything' or 'everyone'. It very often means 'some of all'.

For instance, in the book of Acts we have a description of events on the Day of Pentecost. Peter explained the exuberance, boldness and speaking in other tongues by the disciples, as a fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy found in the book of Joel. The prophecy reads, *'And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on ALL people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. (Joel 2:28-29).*

At Pentecost God's Spirit was released into 'all categories' of people, not just for a selected few, as was the case in the Old Testament times. Now God's Spirit was poured out on men, women, old and young. In fact the Spirit was now available to '**some of ALL categories of humanity**', rather than just for a few selected categories such as priests, kings and prophets.

The words of Jesus relating to events at the 'End of this Age'

In Matthew, Mark and Luke we read accounts of words spoken by Jesus regarding events at the 'end of the age'. In all three accounts we read words that have puzzled many generations of Christians, *I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away (Matthew 24:34; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32).*

Clearly, the events described by Jesus and his promised return did not take place in the generation who heard his words, nor in many generations since. However, in my opinion the confusion has arisen because translators of the Greek words have not followed the important principle of comparing scripture with scripture.

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The important key to understanding this passage is found in Matthew's account. We read the initial question asked by the disciples, that led to Jesus recounting events that would take place before he returned.

Jesus had just commented on the Jerusalem temple and told his disciples that a time was coming when not one stone would be left standing on another. The disciples responded by asking the question:

*What will be the sign of your coming and the **end of the age?*** (Matthew 24:3)

It is only the Matthew account that clearly states this initial question.

If we look at the Greek words used in this question we find that the 'end' is the word *sunteleia*. This actually means 'full end'. We may ask what 'full end' are the disciples asking about? This word has been translated in some English language Bibles as 'end of the world'. However, the Greek word translated as 'world' is actually *aeon*. The meaning of *aeon* is more commonly 'age', 'indefinite time' or 'dispensation'.

Therefore, the question asked by the disciples was, *"Tell us", they said, "when will this happen and what will be the sign of your coming and of **'the full end of this age?'**"*

After the disciples asked this question, Jesus gave an account of wars, earthquakes, the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and other events so terrifying and dangerous that the survival of all life seems to be in jeopardy. In the Luke account Jesus said, *"Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near"* (Luke 21:29).

Then follows this dramatic statement, *"I tell you the truth, this GENEΑ (Greek word) will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away"*.

It seems that most translators of this word 'genea' have not taken into account the context and content of all three gospel accounts. As a result they have translated the word as 'generation'. Although this is the most common translation of 'genea' it is not the only possible translation. Other less common but nevertheless acceptable translations of *genea* are 'age', 'nation' or 'time'.

In other words, if we compare all three Gospel accounts, this apparently difficult passage can be regarded as a direct answer to the initial question that led Jesus to recount the future world events, leading up to the end of this age. In summary:

The initial question: “Tell us, they said, “when will these things happen and what will be the sign of your coming and the **full end of this age**”?”

Answer by Jesus: “Truly truly (without a doubt) I say to you, **this AGE** (genea) will certainly not come to a ‘full end’ until all these things (that I have told you about) come to pass”.

This explanation enables us to avoid some previous attempts by Christians to explain away the difficulty posed by the reference to ‘generation’. Some had suggested that the reference by Jesus to the fig tree was significant. In Matthew’s account the only tree mentioned is the fig. They pointed out that the fig tree is sometimes associated in the Bible with Israel. Therefore, it was suggested that the budding of the fig tree could refer to the founding of the modern state of Israel in 1948. However, this explanation falls away when we compare the Matthew and Luke accounts. In Luke 21:29 it says ‘*the fig tree and all the trees.*

Clearly the reference to trees sprouting new leaves is an illustration of the fact that budding of new leaves heralds the approach of spring and summer. In like manner, Jesus is saying, when you see all these things I have spoken about actually taking place, you will know that the ‘end of this age’ is near.

I trust that this example of comparing scriptures with other scriptures will convince us that this is a very important ‘key’ to understanding the Bible.

2. Allow the ‘voice of God’ to speak to us through science

The ‘voice of God’ speaking to us through his creation (Psalm 19) has been greatly enlarged by scientific discoveries. If we are prepared to take this ‘voice’ seriously it can enable us to clarify some Bible accounts that may superficially conflict with common sense.

I will just mention four examples:

1. The ‘plague of darkness’ that covered Egypt in the days of Moses (Exodus 10:21-23)
2. The sun standing still in response to Joshua’s prayer (Joshua chapter 10)
3. The ‘voice of God’ splitting the cedar trees (Psalm 29)
4. The words of Jesus: “wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather”

The plague of darkness

In the Exodus account, Moses accurately describes the darkness that spread across Egypt as, *darkness that could be felt* (Exodus 10:21). It is only the scientific age that can throw more light on what God used as a sign to the Egyptian Pharaoh.

We now know that clouds of volcanic ash reached the Nile Delta from eruptions in the northern Mediterranean Sea. This has been determined by cores drilled down into soil in the Nile Delta. From age analysis of fine volcanic ash in the soil it seem most likely that the ‘**darkness that could be felt**’ was a cloud of wind-blown ash that covered the Egyptian part of the land, but not the area where the Israelites lived.

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It is most probable that the ash cloud recorded by Moses came from an eruption of Vesuvius. Vogel et al (1990) studied ash deposits from three northern Mediterranean volcanoes that had major eruptions at about the same time, dated about 1370 BC, with a margin of error of about 80 years. This brings us very close to the biblical date of the Israelite exodus from Egypt, namely 1,446 BC.

This example serves to show how discoveries of modern science can throw valuable light on descriptions of events recorded in the Bible. In addition, it provides independent evidence that the events recorded in Exodus are based in real history.

The sun standing still

We have an example in the book of Joshua of events interpreted by the witnesses in the only way they could understand in a pre-scientific age. It seemed to them that the sun must have stood still and this was further reinforced by the fact that Joshua had prayed that it would not set, presumable to give his army more time to destroy his enemies (Joshua 10:11-13). God answered his prayer for extended light but, as so often happens in our own experiences of answered prayer, the answer does not always come in the way we expect.

In our scientific age we know that the only way for the sun to seemingly remain in the same overhead position in the sky is if the earth stopped rotating. This is scientifically totally out of the question. However, fortunately God has allowed science to provide a possible explanation for this prolonged daylight, that took place after Joshua prayed.



In 1908, there was an event that most probably was a comet exploding high above Siberia. The explosion was so powerful that it flattened trees for kilometres around.

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This Siberian event caused sunlight to be reflected from minute debris high up in the atmosphere. As a result, after sunset the reflected light from these minute particles (probably ice dust) was so brilliant that people could read a newspaper by its light, even in England thousands of kilometres away and this lasted until about 3 am (Handwerk 2009). If this event had taken place in the height of the northern hemisphere summer then the unusual extension of daylight could have lasted through to the dawn of the next day.

It is very significant that the Bible account links this unusual prolonging of daylight with great hail stones that fell from heaven onto the fleeing army, killing more of them than died in the battle. Such a shower of deadly chunks of ice could be associated with the explosive break-up of a comet, as it entered the upper atmosphere.

In other words, the biblical writer was describing a real historical event. However, his description of it and his interpretation of the cause was limited by his human understanding in a pre-scientific age. The spiritual reality and significance of the event remains unchanged by a possible scientific explanation. It was still true that Joshua was motivated to pray for extended daylight and it remains true that God arranged the timing, location and characteristics of the event.

The voice of God splitting the Cedar trees

In Psalm 29 we have an illustration of two important facts. Firstly, that this is an example of Bible poetry, inspired by an electrical storm. Secondly, that the writer believed it is the thunder that breaks the cedar trees.

We read, *The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon. The passage also speaks of flashes of lightning.*



Clearly the Psalmist is inspired by the majesty and ferocity of an electrical storm and he rightly attributes all of nature, including the thunder and lightning as part of God's creation. Even the thunder speaks to us of God's majestic creative acts revealed to us through nature (Psalm 19).

However, we live in an age where science can better understand the God-ordained laws of this universe responsible for electrical storms. Science also tells us that it is not the thunder (voice) that breaks the cedars but actually the lightning strike.

The words of Jesus: “Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather”

Jesus said, *“For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather”* (Matthew 24:27-28).

In the Luke account we read, *“Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left”. “Where, Lord?” They asked. He replied “Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather”* (Luke 17:35-37).

A scientific study of African vultures revealed interesting behaviour used to locate dead animals. A researcher observed vulture soaring behaviour from a motorised glider (Pennycuick 1972). Another study was reported by Jackson (2008).

These studies revealed that vultures often fly very high in thermal updrafts. They then spread out across the sky so that each bird can just see other vultures around it as well as the earth below. If one vulture spots a carcass it starts a steep downward glide. This is immediately noticed by other vultures spread around it at considerable distances. Thus, within seconds widely scattered vultures all head rapidly to the same carcass.



In other words, Jesus said that when he returns everyone who is destined to be part of his eternal plans will immediately know and will find themselves gathered to himself.

This picture is further reinforced by other statements made by Jesus. He said, *“At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the*

earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other (Matthew 24: 30-31)

Conclusions

In the Bible we see that God’s revelations about himself have come in many different ways, expressed to us as he inspired various human writers to take up their pen and write, but these writers were still influenced by the knowledge of the times. We can see how his revelations about himself have been progressive over time. We can also see how Jesus

brought us detailed new revelations, some of which changed Old Testament understandings.

Jesus threw new light on Old Testament documents and he even changed some of the things written by Moses. For instance, he changed the 'eye for an eye' morality to one of love your neighbours and even your enemies (Matthew 5:38-44). Instead of harsh judgments against offenders Jesus taught forgiveness. He even changed the Mosaic rules relating to divorce (Matthew 5:31-32; Mark 10:2-8).

Clearly it is important to view various parts of the Bible within the context of the times they were written and to understand Old Testament books in the light of New Testament revelations.

Overall, it is good advice to follow what Paul wrote to Timothy, *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth* (2 Timothy 2:15).

One very important practical application of 'correctly handling' is to compare scriptures with **all other** scriptures that relate to the same topic. In addition, to take very seriously the 'voice of God' speaking to us through his creation and accept that this 'voice' is being greatly expanded through scientific discoveries. Our generation is taught to be analytical and to seek for answers to questions. More than any proceeding one, our generation finds some events recorded in the Bible hard to accept logically, such as the sun standing still. Fortunately the Creator has also provided this generation with enhanced ability to understand these things. They are certainly descriptions of real historical events, but written down within the limitations of knowledge at that time.

Understanding the science behind observed events in no way removes God from the picture. With his foreknowledge he knows when and how to use the laws of nature that he put in place, so as to demonstrate his reality. Often it is the timing and intensity of so called 'natural events' that show us the reality of God and show us his intimate involvement in the details of human history.

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