

Bible Study from a Semitic Perspective

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Most students and teachers of the Bible that have been trained in looking at Holy Scripture from a Western perspective with a heavy emphasis of Koine Greek and some Hebrew. Occasionally, a user may delve into the Biblical Aramaic when studying Daniel and Ezra. However, there is a wealth of knowledge that can be gleaned in New Testament studies by also looking at the texts that were written in Aramaic (Syriac).

When I lecture on the Principles of Holy Scripture Study our Bible Study class looks at various Principles of Interpretation and discuss some of the basic premises. We begin with the premise that the Holy Scriptures contain God's infallible and inerrantly inspired words. That the texts were given by the Holy Spirit but that they were selected, compiled, and translated by man. Most importantly, they were validated by the Lord Jesus Christ. Building on this we look at why knowledge of language, culture and customs are vital to understanding the texts. The historical background and archeological evidence are also important. It is essential to consider the actual historical situation and events (life setting) for each event recorded in the text. The genre, purpose, and plan of each book must be considered. Then, the context of each verse and section as well as parallel and related passages must also be taken into consideration. At this point we have covered the basics which are considered in every basic class on Hermeneutics or Biblical Interpretation.

To move ahead we must ask if we are going to take the Bible literally as a whole or in part or, if not literally, at least seriously. This is important because the Bible is full of symbology, idiomatic expressions, and sayings that lose their meaning when translated from one language to another and are transmitted in time to another culture.

To help us analyze the text there are many tools available for Bible Study. One of my challenges is deciding which one to use since so many are available in general areas of Bible study. We must never forget that the most important "tool" is the Bible itself. The Holy Scriptures shed a lot of light on the commentaries. It is best to look at the text first in our own language and then study it closely in the original language(s). There are lexicons, dictionaries, and word studies available as resources in this initial work. It is important to note any changes in translating the same word since this may provide a clue relative to any bias in translation. Next, we should consult cultural and historical reference works for more background information. Using concordances will show us where the same words are used in different texts. Finally, consult the commentaries, study guides, and other material relative to the text. Don't rush into doing this first to save time and effort. If you do you risk missing a wealth of information directly from the text itself. Make sure your sources are reliable or that you at least identify their weaknesses.

To provide an overview of essential areas, my lectures on Principles of Bible Study cover the following subjects which, in my opinion, are often missed in most classes on Bible study and Hermeneutics:

1. The Aramaic Language
2. Idioms and Figures of Speech
3. Revelation, Mysticism, and Supernatural Occurrences
4. Near Eastern Culture, Customs and Manners
5. The Near Eastern Psychology
6. Symbolism and Imagery in the Holy Scripture
7. Near Eastern Amplification in the Holy Scripture
8. The Manuscript Order of the Holy Scripture
9. A Semitic/Hebraic Perspective of the Holy Scripture
10. Personal Relationships in the Holy Scripture

Let's just briefly touch on the first topic in this essay. The Aramaic Language - Hebrew and Aramaic are the basis for understanding the language of Holy Scripture because they were the primary languages used by the priests, prophets, and patriarchs as well as by Jesus Christ and His apostles and disciples. Aramaic was the lingua franca – major/common language - of the Near East from approximately 800 BC to 700 CE. They are uniquely powerful and intrinsic languages containing nuances of meaning that are lost in Greek, Latin,

English, and other languages. Bible scholars must consider that the Greek language introduces Greek religious and philosophical meanings foreign to the original text which may alter the intended meaning of a Semitic speaker or writer. Aramaic was the language used by Abraham and the Patriarchs. It was the lingua franca of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires. As the lingua franca of the Near East it was used extensively until the rise of Islam in the 7th Century CE when it evolved into the dominant Arabic language. Aramaic continued to be used by Christians in the Near East and throughout the world to this day. The Christians of the East - in Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and India were discipled by Mar Toma (Saint Thomas) and have used the same Aramaic (Syriac) Scriptures and Liturgy since 2nd Century AD. These Near Eastern Christians sent missionaries as far East as China and Japan. The Peshitta ("straight", "simple", "pure") text has remained intact for at least 1600 years.

Because of the relative absence of electronic tools for Syriac studies, I had to search far and wide for books and manuscripts and I was elated to discover that Logos came out with two Scholar editions providing electronic tools. I have found great value in adding the following Logos resources to my research tools:

- Aramaic Text & Morphology
- The Targums from the files of the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon Project
- Syriac Texts & Morphologies
- Syriac Peshitta NT w/ Morphology
- Old Syrian Gospels : Codex Curetonianus
- Old Syrian Gospels : Codex Sinaiticus
- Dictionary of Biblical Languages (Aramaic OT)
- Analytical Lexicon of the Syriac NT

Most of the users of the Logos software editions will greatly benefit from the above tools. Bible Works 7 also has an excellent module put together by Jan Magiera with some assistance from me on Eastern Syriac phonetics.

Bible study is infinitely rewarding and it is also very challenging. Since the Holy Scripture does not always openly reveal its secrets to us, we must spend time and effort to gain deeper understanding. When we begin to learn the texts in original languages, including Aramaic, the Holy Scripture comes alive in a way that is otherwise impossible.

Today we have greater access to valuable resources than ever before to make this level of study possible. Electronic software enables us to effectively organize our Bible study time and proceed at a pace that was not previously possible. Through serious study and teaching of Holy Scripture we attain two of our highest desires: personal intellectual achievement and glory to God. My prayer is that you will enrich your Bible study with these ideas.