

Pitfalls of Scripture Interpretation (I)

“Pitfall”: ‘trap, mistake that makes us fall into error’.

Introduction

One of the biggest traps for preachers is “verse hunting”. We grab one verse and run, but we ignore who said it, to whom, where, when, and why. That is how cults are born.

2 Tim. 2:15 (KJV) *Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*

“Rightly dividing” requires us to know the context first. Context is king.

Objectives

By the end of Part I, every learner will:

(1) Ask five questions before teaching any verse:
Who? To Whom? Where? When? Why?

(2) Know who has authority today, Jesus or Moses?

“God... has in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.” (Heb. 1:1-2)

VIRUS 8

(3) Distinguish between different audiences:
baptism of fire for unbelievers (Matt. 3:12),
baptism of Spirit for apostles / believers (Acts 1:5).

Presentation

1. There Are Five “Keys” To Context

The first two keys are presented in Virus 8. The remaining three keys are presented in Virus 9. The relevant Evaluation Questions & Answers and corresponding Prayer appear at the end of Virus 9.

2. Key 1: Encoder Status: “Who is Speaking?”

Who gave the speaker authority?

Example

“This is my beloved Son... hear ye him.” (Matt. 17:5)

Moses said in Lev. 24:20: “an eye for an eye”.
Jesus said in Matt. 5:38-39: “but I say unto you, resist not evil”.

Who do we obey today? We obey Jesus:

Heb. 3:3-6 ³For this One has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honour than the house. ⁴For

VIRUS 8

every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God. ⁵And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, ⁶but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.

Moses was a servant. Christ is Son. The Son's word is more authoritative than a servant's word.

Acts 3:22-23 says: "...every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be utterly destroyed from among the people".

Test: If Jesus contradicts Moses, we obey Jesus. He is the last Encoder, the Christ.

3. Key 2: Audience Analysis: "Who is Being Addressed?"

Misunderstanding the audience leads to error in the application.

(1) Baptism of Fire vs Baptism by the Spirit (Matt. 3:7-12 vs Acts 1:4-5).

Matt. 3:7-12 describes John seeing Pharisees and Sadducees - "O generation of vipers" (KJV) - coming to his baptism. Alongside "bring forth fruits meet for repentance" and "baptism with the Holy Spirit", he warned them about "baptism

of fire” and “chaff burned with unquenchable fire”, referring to “hell fire” for unbelievers.

By contrast, in Acts 1:5, Jesus was speaking to His apostles of things pertaining to the kingdom of God. He preached only the “baptism of the Holy Spirit”.

If we do not check the audience, we could think that “fire baptism” is for the Church. It is not. It is judgment for unrepentant sinners.

(2) Kingdom of Heaven vs Kingdom of God (Matt. 13:33 vs Luke 13:20).

Matthew wrote to Jews. Jews did not like saying “God” directly because “God is too holy”. So Matthew used “Kingdom of Heaven”.

Luke wrote to Theophilus / Gentiles (Luke 1:3). Gentiles had no problem with saying “God”. So Luke used “Kingdom of God”.

Same kingdom. Different audience, different words. Context removes confusion.

(3) Works of Faith vs Works of the Law (Jam. 2:14-17 vs Rom. 3:20).

Paul wrote to Jews who trusted Moses’s Law for salvation. He wrote “by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified” (Rom. 3:20).

VIRUS 8

James wrote to believers who said “I have faith” but did nothing. He wrote: “faith, if it hath not works, is dead” (Jam. 2:17).

Paul says “the law cannot save”. James says “real faith will work”. Both are true. Knowing the audience aids interpretation.

Pitfalls of Scripture Interpretation (II)

Know the Place, the Time, the Occasion: the three Application Questions.

Introduction

Dear Bible reader, after “Who and To Whom”, we must ask “Where? When? Why?” A verse from 1500 BC Sinai cannot run 2026 Port Harcourt church in the same way. That is mixing old wine with new wineskins (Mark 2:22). But “context” does not mean “cancel”; 2 Tim. 3:16 teaches us that “all scripture is profitable”. The law still reveals God’s heart and gives us a knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20).

2 Cor. 3:6 says: “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life”. The “letter” here is reading Sinai’s covenant as if we are still Israel at the mountain. The “Spirit” is reading it through the lens of Christ who fulfilled it (Matt. 5:17).

We have the Holy Spirit to assist us and teach us all things (John 14:26).

It is helpful to understand that Scripture reveals three strands of law:

(1) Moral Law. This reflects God’s character, which does not change. “You shall not murder,

steal, lie...” (Ex. 20), sexual ethics (Lev. 18:22; Rom. 1:26-27). This law is reaffirmed in the New Testament. Jesus and the apostles repeat it (Matt. 5:17-19; Rom. 13:9). It was not tied to Israel’s land or to the temple.

We still call sin “sin” and we preach repentance (Acts 17:30).

(2) Civil / Judicial Law: Israel’s National Laws.

Death penalties, property rules, cities of refuge (Num. 35). These governed Israel as a nation-state. The church is not a nation-state. So we do not stone adulterers (John 8:7). The principle of justice remains, but the penalty was for that covenant.

(3) Ceremonial Law. Sacrifices, priesthood, food rules, festivals (Lev. 11; Heb. 7:12). These are a “shadow of things to come but the substance is of Christ” (Col. 2:16-17).

Heb. 8:13 says “he hath made the first old”. We do not sacrifice bulls because Jesus is the Lamb (John 1:29).

Given these three “strands”, we can discern that a verse taken from the word spoken to 1500 BC Sinai must be read with reference to the following three questions to give context:

VIRUS 9

(1) Who was it given to? To Israel as nation, or to all mankind?

(2) What kind of law is it? Moral, civil, or ceremonial?

(3) What does the New Testament say? Has Christ fulfilled it, reaffirmed it, or set it aside (Matt. 5:17)?

Example: Food Laws (Lev. 11)

Take for example the food laws of Lev. 11. We know that they no longer apply physically. Paul said that the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking. He also said “I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean” (Rom. 14:14).

Jesus said, “Whatever enters a man ... cannot defile him, ...it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods” (Mark 7:18-19).

Jesus went on to say:

Mark 7:20-23 ²⁰... “What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. ²¹For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, ²²thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride,

VIRUS 9

foolishness. ²³All these evil things come from within and defile a man.”

If we no longer obey the food rules physically, what do they teach us spiritually?

- * Holiness: “Be separate”: Lev. 20:26: “Ye shall be holy unto me: for I the LORD am holy, and have severed you from other people.” Pigs, shellfish, eagles ate dead things / decay. God’s people were not to look like the nations around them. “You belong to Me, not to Canaan.”
- * Obedience in small things: God could have said “do not eat poison”. Instead He gave detailed lists. Why? To train hearts to say “Yes, Lord” even when they did not understand. Deut. 8:3: “man doth not live by bread only, but by every word...”. Food laws taught Israel: God’s word trumps my appetite. His law trumps my lust.
- * Shadow of Christ: The animals pictured spiritual truths. Clean animals chew cud, an image of meditating on the Word – they discern God’s heart through “every word”. They eat grass, not dead things / decay (flesh). They have split hooves, an image of walking separately, and rightly dividing. “Unclean foods” point to things that corrupt the heart. Does this TV show, this friend, this habit defile me? That is Lev. 11, applied in Christ.

VIRUS 9

Rule of thumb: If the New Testament repeats it, we obey it. If Christ fulfilled it, we rest in Him. If it was Israel's national law, we learn the principle.

Context gives life, not loopholes.

Objectives

By the end of Part II, every disciple will:

- (1) Check arena relevance. Paul preached in a different way to Jews and Greeks (Acts 13:16 vs Acts 17:22, 1 Cor. 9:19-23).
- (2) Know the time / dispensation. The Law of Moses ended, the Law of Christ rules now (Gal. 6:2; John 1:17).
- (3) Find occasion and purpose. Why did Paul write 1 Cor. 5:9? Because of fornication. His purpose was to correct sin.
- (4) Domesticate first, then apply. Understand the original meaning, then apply to us (Rom.15:4).

Presentation

Keys 3, 4 and 5.

1. Key 3: Arena Relevance: "Where?"

Place changes approach. For example in Acts 13:14-21, Paul is in the Jewish synagogue in Antioch. He is talking to "Men of Israel, and ye

that fear God”. He starts with the patriarchs (“our fathers”), the dwelling in the land of Egypt, and the history of the children of Israel. They knew it.

In Acts 17:22-28, Paul is standing in the midst of Mars’ Hill, Athens: a Gentile audience. He starts with an inscription “To The Unknown God” and creation. Nothing about Abraham, “our fathers” or dwelling in Egypt.

Same Gospel. Different starting point. If we preach “Abraham” to people who do not know the Bible, we will lose them. Know the arena.

2. Key 4: Timing - “Which Dispensation?” - “When?”

In Deut. 18:15-19, God promised “a Prophet like Moses”, who is Christ.

Luke 9:35: “This is my beloved Son: hear him.”

John 1:17: “For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

We should keep in mind two different time periods:

VIRUS 9

(1) Time Period 1: The Law of Moses, referring to the old covenant / constitution: “an eye for an eye”, purging by animal blood (Heb. 9:13). This was preparatory. Gal. 3:24 says “the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ”.

If we obey Sinai law now without due consideration (without applying the three questions or the rule of thumb set out in the Introduction above), we get “a spirit of error” (1 John 4:1,6). We must separate the old covenant (Heb. 8:13) from the new covenant (Luke 22:20). The old becomes the example for our learning (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11). The new becomes our rule: “those things... in me, do” (Phil. 4:9).

(2) Time Period 2: The Law of Christ, referring to the new constitution: “turn the other cheek”, purging by His blood (Heb. 9:14). This is the current dispensation (Gal. 6:2): “bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ”.

Gal. 6:2 *Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.*

VIRUS 9

What is the Law of Christ?

It is what James terms “The Royal Law”:

Jam. 2.8 (KJV) *If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well.*

It is what Jesus said after the Last Supper:

John 13:34 ³⁴ *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

In Gal. 6:2, quoted above, the word translated “burden” is the Greek word ‘baros’, meaning heavy load, crushing weight. Like grief, sickness, temptation, poverty, depression. The kind of load that breaks you if you carry it alone.

Paul says we should carry each other’s load; that is “the law of Christ”. Jesus carried our cross, so we carry each other’s heavy loads. When your sister is in tears, you do not say “bear your own burden”. You sit, pray, weep with her: “rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15).

VIRUS 9

That is Christ's law. No one survives the Christian life alone.

Three verses later, Paul says:

Gal. 6:5 *For each one shall bear his own load.*

Does he contradict himself?

No, they are two different burdens.

The Greek word used here is 'phortion', your backpack, the loading of a ship, the load you are meant to carry. Your own sins, your own calling, your own obedience, your own walk with God, "the good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

Paul says: I cannot repent for you. I cannot pray for you every day forever. I cannot stand before God for you. Each of us shall give an account of ourselves to God (Rom. 14:12). That backpack is yours. I can help carry the 'baros', but I cannot live your 'phortion':

* 'Baros': "Sister, your grief is too heavy, let me help you carry it." (Law of Christ, Gal. 6:2)

VIRUS 9

- * ‘Phortion’: “Sister, I cannot read your Bible for you. You must feed yourself too.” (Personal duty, Gal. 6:5)

Jesus modelled both: He bore our ‘baros’ (“he hath borne our griefs” (Isa. 53:4)), but He also said “if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross” (Luke 9:23). That cross is ‘phortion’.

If you see a brother drowning, do not quote Gal. 6:5 and walk away. That is law, not Christ. Jump in, bear his ‘baros’.

But also do not carry his ‘phortion’ for him. Do not do his repentance. Do not make him a baby forever (Heb. 5:12). Help him stand, then let him walk.

In Summary, ‘Time Period 2’, the Law of Christ, is love that carries and love that trains. Both are mercy.

3. Key 5: Occasion and Purpose “Why?”

‘Occasion’ finds for us the problem that forced the letter. ‘Purpose’ finds for us what the writer wanted to achieve.

VIRUS 9

Examples

(1) 1 Cor. 5:9: “I wrote to you in my epistle not to company with sexually immoral people.”

‘Occasion’ refers to sin in Corinth. ‘Purpose’ is to achieve purity of the Church.

(2) 1 Cor. 7:1: “Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me.” 'Occasion' here is about their questions. 'Purpose' answers them.

(3) Luke 15:1-2: “Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying...”.

‘Occasion’ tells us that sinners came. ‘Purpose’ tells three parables of lost things (a sheep, a coin and the ‘Prodigal’ son) to show God’s love and the joy in heaven when one sinner repents.

(4) Matt. 23:2-3: “The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses’s seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works.”

Why did Jesus say that if the law was about to change at the cross? First let us look the “when” and the “who”:

VIRUS 9

- * When?

Jesus said this before His death, before resurrection, while the Old Covenant was still running (Heb. 9:17): “a testament is of force after men are dead”. The temple was still standing. Sacrifices were still happening. So He told Jews under Sinai: “Keep obeying the Torah as Moses gave it, even if the teachers are hypocrites”. Do not throw out God’s Word because of bad men.

- * Who?

Look at Matt. 23:1: “Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples”. He was talking to Jews under the Law. He was not yet speaking to the church, the Body of Christ. The church began at Pentecost (Acts 2), after Jesus's death and resurrection.

After resurrection, the apostles did not tell Gentiles to “go sit in Moses’s seat”. In Acts 15:29, the Jerusalem Council told them: “abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, from sexual immorality”. Not “keep Sabbath, food laws, circumcision”.

Why? Because Jesus fulfilled Moses’s seat. Now we sit under Christ’s seat (Eph. 1:20-22). We obey the Law of Christ, not the Law of Moses.

VIRUS 9

That said, the principle of Matt. 23:3 still stands: “do what they teach from Scripture, do not copy their hypocrisy”. That applies forever. If a pastor preaches “love your neighbour” (Lev. 19:18), we obey the verse. If he lives in adultery, we do not copy his lifestyle. Respect the Word, reject the hypocrisy.

Jesus did not change His mind. He kept His appointment. The law was not wrong. It was temporary, like scaffolding, until the Building which is Christ came (Gal. 3:24-25).

4. Domesticate, Apply

The key is ‘domesticate’ first, that is first understand the context and perspective of the original hearers. Then apply. Ask “what does King Jesus say to us now?”

2 Tim. 3:16-17 says: “All Scripture ... is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete...”.

Summary

Consider these five key questions before you teach any verse:

1. Who is speaking? Jesus or Moses?

VIRUS 9

2. To whom? Jews? Gentiles? Believers?
Unbelievers?
3. Where? Synagogue? Mars Hill? Your church
assembly?
4. When? Law time or Grace time? (John 1:17)
 - * Has it been superseded by Christ? If yes,
obey Christ.
5. Why is the Scripture included?
 - * Occasion? What problem is being
addressed?
 - * Purpose? What did the writer want to
achieve? 1 Cor. 11:2 says: “keep the
ordinances”.
 - * Are we at liberty to choose (Rom. 14) or is
there a specific command that we should
follow (1 Cor. 14:37)?

Evaluation Questions & Answers

1. Which five questions must I ask before
teaching a verse?
 - * Who is speaking? To Whom? Where? When?
Why?
2. Who has final authority if Moses and Jesus
disagree?
 - * Jesus: “hear ye him” (Matt. 17:5).

VIRUS 9

3. Can “baptism of fire” (Matt. 3:11) be for believers today?
 - * No, John was speaking to Pharisees and Saducees (“O generation of vipers” - Matt. 3:7 (KJV)). Fire is hell fire for the unrepentant (Matt. 3:12). Believers get Spirit baptism (Acts 1:5).
4. Why does Matthew say “Kingdom of Heaven” but Luke says “Kingdom of God”?
 - * Audience. Matthew wrote to Jews who avoided saying “God”. Luke wrote to Gentiles. Same kingdom, different words.

Prayer

Father, deliver us from verse-hunting and wrong dividing. Give us wisdom to ask Who, To Whom, Where, When, Why before we speak. Seal our hearts to obey King Jesus above Moses. Teach us to separate old covenant from new so that we do not mix new wine and old wineskin. Let Your Word be life, not death. In Jesus’s name, the true Interpreter, Amen.