

Bible Study

Standard Format for a Biblical Research

When trying to study a passage of Matthew's Gospel, or of any other Gospel or any book of the Bible, it would be of great help if you were to consistently stick to the following standard procedure.

0. Always *start the session with deep personal and/or group prayer* if you are studying with others. Ask the Holy Spirit to take control of your mind, your heart and all your senses, so that you can "have the same attitudes that were also in Christ Jesus." (Phil 2: 5). The study of the Bible must be intended to bring you to know Jesus more closely so that you can **reach his stature**; otherwise it would be a meaningless exercise.
1. *Read the passage slowly and attentively* (maybe even more than once)
2. It is very important to *contextualize the passage*: In which section of the Gospel/Book is the passage located? What motivated it? how is the passage linked to what precedes and follows it?

Remember Matthew's Gospel is divided in three sections.

- a. [Infancy of Jesus (1-4:1 - 11), Public Life of Jesus (4:12 - 26) or the Paschal events (26 - 28)]
- b. The Public Life of Jesus Section in Matthew is centered around five main discourses of Jesus
 1. Proclamation of the Kingdom (4:12 - 7);
 2. Ministry and Mission in Galilee (8:1 - 11:1);
 3. Opposition from Israel (11:2 - 13:53);
 4. Jesus, the Kingdom and the Church (13:54 - 18:35);
 5. Ministry in Judea and Jerusalem (19:1 - 25:46);
- c. Possibly, read the whole chapter which includes the passage;

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3. *Read the parallel and referenced passages* in the other Gospels (if any) and the references to the passages given at the foot or on the margins of the page; study the similarities and the differences of the presentations. In the Gospels they may reflect the historicity of the passage (or lack of it) or the difference of goals and aims in the various biblical authors.
 4. *Individuate the key words* of the passages (e.g. Blessed the poor in spirit because theirs is the kingdom of heaven) and find the corresponding words in Greek (remember the books in the New Testament were all written in **Greek**, so the original word used by the human author bears great weight) and, possibly, in **Hebrew** (the closest to the language spoken by Jesus (Aramaic), and is the language of most of the Old Testament so that it is helpful to see the nuances of the different meanings and usages). Are these same Greeks/Hebrews words or their synonyms (or antonyms) used also in the parallel passages?

Look for the explanation of the passage given by the Church (if it has one) or other biblical scholars in books, magazines and websites.

5. When taking notes from the references be careful to annotate the various sources, namely, **(1) the author's name, (2) the book or article's magazine, or website, (3) the volumes, (4) the publishing house and city, (5) the year of publication, (6) the chapter title, (7) the page number**, in this standard order.

Examples:

1. Brown, R.E. et alii, Eds., The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Prentice Hall, Englewood, New Jersey, 1990
2. Bechard, D.P. Ed., The Scripture Documents, An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings, The Liturgical Press, Collegiville, Ma, 2002 *Providentissimus Deus*, 37
3. አባ ተወልደብርሃን ጸጋይ ማኅበር ን. አ. ካፑቲን: ትምህርቲ ቅዱስ መጽሐፍ: 1ይ - 3ይ መጽሐፍ: ቤት ማኅተም ፍራንቸስካና: ኦሪጋኒ: 1991 ዓ. ም. ኤርትራ (1999 ዓ, ም, ፈ.):
4. አባ አማኑኤል ምስገን ዘማ. ን.አ. ካፑቲን: ትምህርቲ ቅዱስ መጽሐፍ: 4ይ መጽሐፍ (ጽሑፋት ወንጌላውያን): ብጋልዮት ካቶሊካዊ ምንቅስቃስ ተሓድሶ ብመንፈስ: ኦሪጋኒ - ኅዳር 1979 ዓ.ም.

Some other people might have different suggestions for reporting reference material. I hope this is the simplest and most common. To record your references is an easy and very important strategy for you to retrieve the material at a later date, beside other considerations.

6. Now, equipped with all the information gathered with the above process, you are ready to give an explanation of the passage that you are studying.

Remember, passages in the Bible can have a **literal, analogical, symbolical and spiritual meanings**. Be careful not to approach all the books in the Bible, or even all the sections of one book, in the same way... The literal meaning is apparently the most obvious, provided you know

A. **the exact meaning of the technical words** used in the Gospel and the various nuances of its use in other parts of the Gospels itself and other books of the Bible in general;

B. the **literary style** of the book or the chapter where the passage is found (**historical, prophetic, apocalyptic, poetical, fictional, etc.** Sometimes a book can contain one or more styles at the same time...)

Often people are tempted to jump into the spiritual meaning of the passage and draw applications to their present situation. While the ultimate goal is to find exactly the spiritual meaning and its proclamation to us in particular, and under the present conditions, however, we cannot rush to it without first having grasped its literal, analogical and symbolical meaning. Otherwise, we run the risk of misinterpreting the message and drawing unwarranted conclusions and applications.

7. When interpreting a passage, **focus always on the aims of the author in writing the Book** in general and the passage of interest to you in particular, and the means he used to reach his goals (through recounting the **events**, or the **miracles**, or the **teachings** of Jesus (**general principles**: "Blessed the poor in spirit because theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3), **parables**: "you are the salt/light of the world..." (5:13-16), **moral advices**: "Do not judge because you will be judged with the same measure you use..."(7:1-2)). Try to find out how this passage specifically

fits in the general picture of the whole Gospel: (for Matthew: (1) the Messianism of Jesus and his fulfillment of all the prophecies of the OT, (2) the fatherhood of God and (3) the proclamation of the Kingdom of God.)

8. Now you have reached the crucial moment: ***the proclamation of the good message to yourself***. How does the passage and its meaning apply to you, today, in your personal life, in your real situations? Here is where the word of the Bible: "Your Word is light to my path and a lamp to my feet" becomes true. The word you have analyzed, scrutinized and dissected, must now take flesh in you as it did in Mary.

ELEMENTARY REFERENCE BOOKS IN THE STUDY OF THE BIBLE

1. **The Bible itself**. Read the same verses in various translations also and try to catch the nuances among the various versions.

(In Tigrinya we have:

- a. for the ***whole Bible*** the first and second translations by the Bible Society. In general the first translation is very close to the original Greek at the expenses of the Tigrinya language, while the second version is excellent in Tigrinya, especially in the spelling, but not so faithful to the literal Greek.
- b. For the ***New Testament***, we have, besides the two above translations, also the one published by the Catholic Committee and later reprinted in a revised edition.
- c. For the ***Gospels*** we have also the translation by Abba Adhanom Se'lu and published by the Franciscana Printing Press.

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2. The ***Book of the Concordance***: a book where most of the words in the Bible is listed and all the verses where it is used is shown, often grouped according to the ways it is used.). The use of this aid is a must for a very first information on the various usages of the word in the Bible. To this, one should add the ***Bible Dictionaries***, which often is a very essential way of understanding the meaning of many Theological and biblical terms, their references and applications. In Tigrinya these works are not available yet, but something was done by the Bible Society in Amharic, if someone finds it easier to understand.
 3. The ***New Jerome Biblical Commentary*** and the ***College Bible Commentary*** give a general introduction to the whole Bible and its various parts, as well as a summary comment to most pericopes of the Bible. By their intrinsic nature the presentation is very general and superficial, but they contain very good bibliographies for a deeper introduction of the Bible.
 4. The Church' documents on the Bible are another source of great help to understand the content of the Bible in general. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is of course the basic source for a general introduction to the fundamental principle of bible study. For more details of the other Church documents I refer you to the above mentioned The Scripture Documents, An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings, Liturgical Press, by Bechard, D. P. and the website <http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/index.html>.
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5. Unfortunately, the biblical bibliography in tigrinya is rather limited. For the Catholic side the two above mentioned books are a sample of what is still available for a bible study. They are a general introduction to the OT and the Gospels respectively. Being in Tigrinya and intended for a very basic course in Bible, they are of great practical use. I remember that after these two books two similar works were also published, one by the Pavoni Center of Studies in Asmara and the other by A. Solomon G. Cristos in Mendefera. Unfortunately I do not remember the bibliographical details.

Besides, it is useful to remind the book of Abba Adhanom: ቅዱስ ታሪኽ: at the moment out of print. Besides the many pictures that embellish the book, the editorial work also makes it attractive and easy to read. the book could be assumed to be a prerequisite for anyone who attempts to tackle a serious bible study course.

Some scholars from the Orthodox Church and the Lutheran Evangelical Protestant Church also have some publication in this fields in Amsara. However, at present I do not have the details.

6. For more serious study, cf. publications at a Catholic Bookshop on individual biblical books, on the history, the archeology, the literature and other related topics or a Catholic library and some Catholic Biblical websites, e.g. www.catholic-resources.org/bible , <http://www.c-b-f.org/> , <http://employees.csbsju.edu/> . Just type the key words "*catholic biblical websites*" to the GOOGLE searching machine to find immediately more than 1000 000 (one million sites!). The content of the books, biblical journals and/or the website articles can accomodate all level of sophistication in the researchers. To search for comments on a specific passage of the Bible, you just type the reference on the GOOGLE searching machine and choose among the given literature.

Homework - Based on the above described steps, try to interpret the following passages from the Gospel of Matthew:

1. **Mt 8: 5 - 13** The healing of the son of the centurion
2. **Mt 12: 46 - 50** The family of Jesus
3. **Mt 19: 8 - 9** About divorce
4. **Mt 21: 18 - 22** About the sterile fig tree
5. **Mt. 22: 34 - 40** The greatest commandment