

How to read letters (Cyprus Training: week 1, session 15)

Intro 40% of NT = letters => need to learn How...

Practice on one of the shortest letters in NT: **Rev.2v8-11**

NB: general principle, start study by reading it all in one go!

1) Who is the letter from? v8b

NB: Std format (Not just NT but many Gk-Rom letters, e.g. Ac.23v26): “From, To, Greetings ♦ Prayer/Thxgvg ♦ *main body of the letter* ♦ (Greetings), Benediction”

[[!open = Hebr, (Rev at 1v4); !clos = Js; !open/clos = 1Jn]]

2) Who is the letter to? v8a

Angel/msggr? (letter contents are actually to the ch itself)

Quick quiz: Largest city in Turkey? *Istanbul* (~14M); Next (& capital)? *Ankara* (~4M). 3rd largest? *Izmir* (3½M)...for most of its history, known as Smyrna!

3) What is the situation? [Accessible historical context = key Epistles distinctive]

General historical: “*a beautiful city, sloping up from the sea, w splendid public buildings on the crown of the hill: schools of medicine & science, & an open air theatre that seated 20K*”

More important = general biblical bkgd (Acts, other letters):

Smyrna 45mi N of Ephesus (Ac.19v8-10, partic v10).

Most important = from letter itself (read to obtain...).

4) Quick detour. Reading a Bible passage, three vital words

context (evth *outside* the text that we need to understand it)

content (evth *in* the text, what the text says)

NB: specific not vague, not just 'what it makes me think of...'
& **conduct** (how God would have *us* rspd to *this* text)
Keep moving context ↔ content to build up a picture.

Here building up *context*, but using the *content* to do so. So...

4a) What was the church in Smyrna facing?

v9a,c: pressure / squeeze; (a normal part of Xn life! See that from context... immed: 1v9 & wider: Acts.14v22; 2Tim.3v12)

Poverty: started poor? lost employmt due to being Xn?

Slander: (We might remember J words in **Matt.10v25**...)

From Jews: [NB bkgrd: Smyrna was proud of its loyalty to Rome; expressed in Emperor Worship: Jews were exempted on religious grounds; ev.one else confessed "Caesar is Lord" or faced the charge of treason. **Join up the dots...**

We can guess that unbelieving Jews in Smyrna had stirred up trouble for Christians, denying the 'Jewishness' of their faith (i.e. "Christians shouldn't share the Jewish exemption"), and thus exposing them to severe Roman persecution.]

5) Why is the writer writing? [= purpose? trying to achieve?]

How to find out? Might say (1Tim.3v14f; 1Jn.1v4+2v1...)

O/w? Bec he wanted them to *know* & *do* certain things.

Letter content => information, teaching & cmds/requests etc.

In e.g. some letters, quite a clear split (e.g. Rom, Eph).

Cmds = a particularly clear way to get at purpose, so identify & list. (= good starting pt in terms of conduct, our rsp.

[[NB: The 'redemptive-historical' context of the letters in Scr (Post-Pentecost, mainly written to chs) makes them the

easiest part of the Bible to (know how to!) apply...]]

6) What **exhortations** (cmds, requests) does the writer give?

E.g. What three cmds does J give to this church?

v10 (-ve, +ve), **v11** ("Heed!" – this same cmd comes 7x)

Continue trying to build up a picture...

7) How do all the various parts of the letter **fit together**

...and fit into the situation & the purpose?

7a) Why might they be afraid?

v9. And now **v10**! (Things were going to get worse!)

⇒ J doesn't promise immunity to troubles (that = false Xy);
not even immunity from death!

Important to know that as you embark on ff J!

7b) What was the ult src of the trouble they were facing?

v9f: State persecution <= Jewish ill will <= Satanic attack

True perspective on things.

Why is this important? bec we are reminded of the devil's
strategy: to cause us to *sin*. [= General truth; identify these!]

Make specific appln: ⇒ What troubles might Xns face in
Cyprus? You? (From the religious? Economic?)

7c) How might the opening words of **v9** help them?

Encrgmt: J knew what they were facing

7d) How might J' self-descrn in **v8** help them?

J could sympathise! (he knew what it was to face death, & he
knew what lay beyond for those who were faithful!)

NB: back to Q1, how the writer styles themselves = signif.

[['expanded' e.g.s: From/Grace: Gal.1v1-5; To: 1Pet.1v2]]

7e) Why would J' words "I know the slander" be an encrgmt?
J knows the reality, whatever people say.

7f) In v9, how does J describe the church? Rich!

Natural follow-on Qn: In what ways are Xns rich?

Forgiven, accepted, adopted, indwelt, heading for glory.*

That doesn't take away the pain or discomfort of pressure, but it does put it into perspective.

*NB: This is built up from general NT; might prefer to start with immed context, then wider book...

7g) What encrgg thing does v10 tell us about J?

He knows the future – troubles & timescales ('ten days' literal or symbolic: fixed duration?) => nth will take him by surprise;

Evth is allowed for our ult good (Good appln to us again)

7h) *What reason* does J give them not to be fearful but to be faithful?

v10end, v11end. -ve: v11: not hurt; +ve: v10: a crown of life
(*wreath: Smyrna hosted a Games every 4 years*)

"what reason...": Note what we are doing here is asking...

8) What is the flow of thought?

Often in the letters (but not here) a writer will use key joining words: "for, because", "since, therefore", "if, then".

[[Look out for these words & think about them very carefully. How do they contribute to the developing argument?]]

But v11 raises another Qn: **What is 'the second death'?**

Generally, how do you find the meaning of a word/phrase which isn't immediately obvious?

9) Does the writer use the same word / phrase elsewhere?

Do a search on the phrase (Bible gateway, STEP bible).
Context again (Context = king!). Start near & wk outwds.
In particular, start with this writer. [[E.g. "faith & works" in Paul & Js; arguably 'faith', 'works' & 'justify' all used diff'ly!]
=> 20v6 but not explained. But: **20v11-15** (v14 & 21v8).

10) What are the key themes, ideas & vocabulary?

Trace 'death' & 'life' words in this short letter.
(look out for contrasting pairs; also lists; also tone + feel)
⇒ If !Xn, life is downhill (ev day = one less day; one day nearer death); If Xn, best is always ahead!

11) What is the tone & feel of the letter?

Reassuring, encouraging! (NB: interesting to work thro' the 7 letters in Rev.2+3, cfg tone & feel).

12) How would you sum up?

Writing helps thinking! The discipline of making a summary...
Sections (headings), flow of thought, themes, and **key msg**:

"Don't be fearful, but be faithful because..."

J knows what his people suffer

J knows the reality, whatever people say

J is well able to sympathise

J says you are rich!

**Need to
do a h/o**

J knows the future – the troubles & the timescales
All the trouble now is worth it, to avoid the ultimate trouble
All you might lose now is worth it, to gain the crown of life.”

Concl: Finish w a true story (Back to Context & Conduct)

“Who was in the congregation at Smyrna that first week when the letter from Patmos was read out?

We don’t know for sure, but we do know that there was a young man who learned at the feet of the Apostle John, & who became a key church leader in Smyrna.

Maybe he was there when this letter was first read out!

What we do know is that ½ a century later the squeeze had not lessened

Around 155BC Polycarp, now an old man, was brought before the Roman governor who tried to persuade him to deny Xt: “Have respect to your old age”

Polycarp declared, “Eighty six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?”

The threats ctd “I will cause you to be consumed by fire, if you will not repent.”

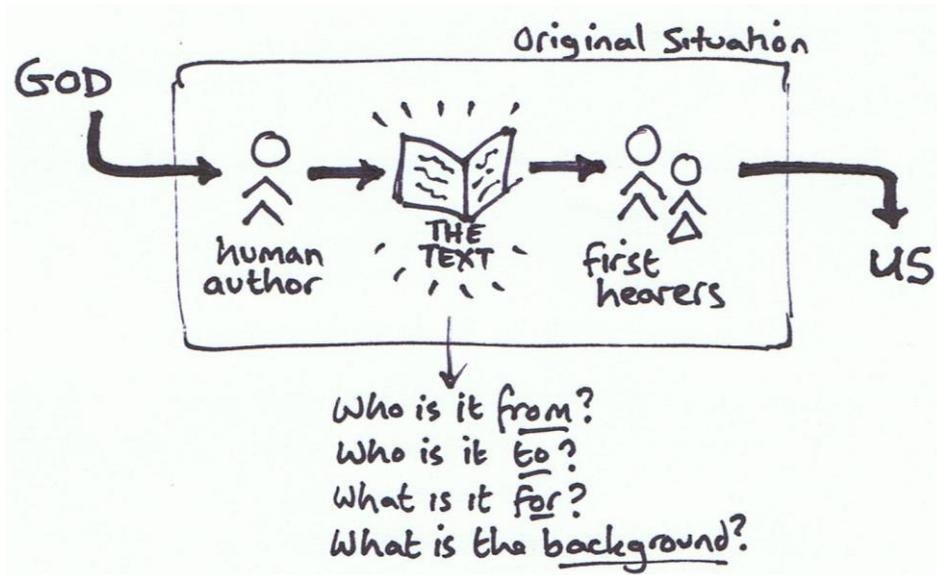
But Polycarp said, “You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is put out, but you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why do you tarry? Bring forth what you will.”

And so Polycarp was martyred & rcvd the crown of life.

May God enable us all not to be fearful but to be faithful!”

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Other notes re Epistles...



As 'occasional letters' (start w original hearers. What would it mean to them? how are they expected to rspd?)

Tailor-made to diff people / situations, Mr.O p112

"The epistles deal with "specific sins, specific duties, specific problems, specific opportunities and specific joys" 114

Look at DaRouchie...