

Learning How to Read

Contra Costa Gospel Church
Adult Sunday School

Text Before Event 2

By now we have articulated two main principles of Biblical interpretation:

Synthesize the whole before you analyze the parts.

Don't analyze the event in isolation. The event always has its place in the larger narrative.

The fact is, the second principle is simply an application of the first. The first principle tells us to take a look at the big picture first and foremost when interpreting the smaller units. The second principle applies that to the specific situation of events contained within historical narratives.

Nevertheless, we treat the second principle separately because of how often we, biblical readers, make the mistake of doing the very thing that is warned against – that is, taking an event out of context and attempting to find meaning in that event without consideration of the larger narrative in which the event is found. Instead, as we attempt to apply the second principle, we find that the meaning of the event is mainly determined by how the author is “using” the event for his prophetic purposes.

Another example...

3) The choosing of Matthias

In Acts 1, after Jesus ascends to heaven, we come across a rather curious event which occurred amongst the disciples. Prior to His death, the apostles numbered 12. However, everyone knows that Judas betrayed Jesus and later committed suicide because of his guilt. After Jesus went to heaven, the apostles were only 11 in number. And so, led by Peter, they replaced Judas with Matthias so as to return the number of apostles to 12. Read Acts 1:15-26.

The story itself is rather straightforward and plain. And yet, it's worth asking the question, what is the point of the event? Why is this recorded? Is there more meaning to this event than simply to tell us what happened? It is worth noting, incidentally, that other than in Acts 1:23 and 26, Matthias is never again mentioned in the Bible. He is, for all intents and purposes, a completely insignificant member of the Twelve.

We've already established an earlier understanding of the Bible that basically said, the Bible is NEVER meant to be understood as mere history. It is always prophetic in nature, and thus, even an event like Matthias' ascension to the Twelve has some kind of prophetic meaning associated with it. What is that meaning?

There is one more interesting note to point out found in Acts 12:1-2. Why is this story relevant to the issue at hand?

In order to arrive at the meaning of Matthias' appointment, we have to understand from a "bird's eye view" the purpose of the book of Acts. In it the author (Luke) wants to show the progression of the gospel and its amazing growth throughout the area. The book seems to be arranged according to Jesus' words in Acts 1:8: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The gospel begins in Jerusalem, continues to grow in the regions of Judah (Southern Israel) and Samaria (Northern Israel), and then eventually breaks through the borders of Israel to neighboring countries all the way to the farthest reaches of the world. Despite all manner of obstacles, nothing will thwart the amazing power of the gospel in its explosion into the world.

Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria

We begin with the gospel starting in Jerusalem. It's not just a location, but also an indication that the gospel starts with the Jews. In the entire first half of Acts, the Christian church was mainly comprised of Jewish converts to Christianity. They didn't have to deal with the issue of Gentile converts yet. And thus, all of the gospel-proclamation activity is conducted by the 12 disciples (and their disciples). The number 12, therefore, is particularly significant because it corresponds to the number of Israelite tribes.

Something changes in Acts 10. In this chapter, Cornelius, a Gentile, encounters an angel who tells him to look for Peter, the leader of the Twelve. Peter, at the same time, has his troubling vision of being commanded to eat unclean foods – foods that he has never eaten in his life since he has followed the traditions of the Law. Peter eventually comes to Cornelius' house to find out why he was summoned. Read Acts 10:24-48.

Ends of the Earth

Despite ethnic tensions and centuries of history, Luke wanted to demonstrate that there would be no stopping the growing power of the gospel, not even the distinction between Jew and Gentile. Although the gospel began in Jerusalem with the Jews, the book demonstrates that the gospel was going to go to the "ends of the earth." However, in a surprise twist, who would bring the gospel to that place? It would not be Peter or the Twelve because their focus was the Jews. Rather, it would be a new "apostle" who would bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. Read Acts 28:11-31. Where does Paul end up at the end of the book?

With this big picture in mind, let's go back to the original question. Why is it important for us to know that Judas was replaced with Matthias, but James was never replaced when he was murdered?