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My Bible sandwiches



Providing structure and meaning to a biblical text

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Structure and meaning

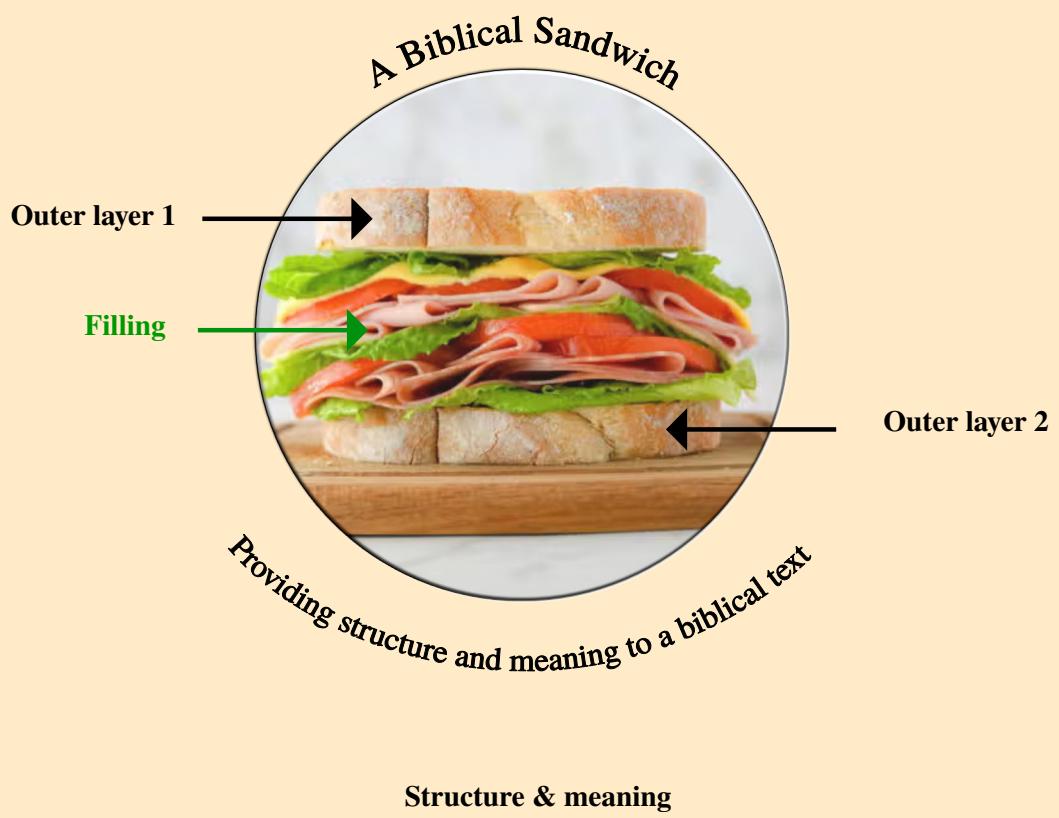
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Structure & meaning

My interest in this introductory sandwich paper is in the structure of texts. *Structure*, or the organisation of ideas that an author brings to his work, is one of the features that is critical to interpretation. In biblical texts, one particular structural technique favoured by writers is the "inclusio", which is a literary device that frames a body of text with similar beginnings and endings. An "inclusio" is also known as a bracket, an envelope, or a bookend. By using this device, the two outer parts highlight the central theme, informing and shaping the reader's understanding of the middle section. I prefer to call inclusios, colloquially, 'sandwiches', which have two outer layers and an appetising filling as depicted in the graphic above.

Everything has *structure*, whether it's the human body, a house, or music and literature. At the micro level of a text, words have structure, words are structured into sentences, sentences are structured into paragraphs, and at the macro level, paragraphs are structured into parts of a whole. Without structure, there is no work of literature - just a jumble of words.

Just as secular writers *structure*, or organise their text to fit their purpose, so too the biblical writers inspired by the Holy Spirit. Structure is essential to interpretation and understanding. Interpretation expresses a point of view about a text's intended meaning. To understand a text is to know its meaning, while to comprehend it, is to understand it completely.

Viewing the Bible as a whole (Old and New Testaments together), God provides us with a perfect example of the inclusio. The Bible begins with God creating our current world, and ends with God creating a new one. Why, when He said seven times that the first one was good? (See Genesis 1). The answer to that is that mankind who was given dominion over it made it a mess, but God will refurbish it, renovate it better than it was before.

Does that mean that mankind won't be privileged to populate it? No, but only people who have been transformed by the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world, get a free pass to citizenship of God's new world.

And that, is the grand narrative of the Bible. Its theme and story is how we get from one creation to another and your part, and mine in it. Moreover, all the gorgeous details along the way are provided in the filling in the centre.

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In addition to structure, a literary work comes from a time, geographical and topographical places including roads, hills, mountains, valleys, rivers and seas, flora, fauna, geology, climate and cultural and political settings, which we need to understand to correctly interpret the biblical text. So, the Bible is set in the ancient Middle East, in the land of Israel and the surrounding countries, such as Egypt, Moab (now Jordan), Syria, Lebanon, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Asia Minor (now Turkey), Greece and Italy.

The biblical writers used the physical spaces of the biblical world to communicate their message, and these landscapes are the context for images, metaphors, similes, narratives, psalms, prophecies, and parables. The Bible land magnifies the Bible, and to understand its landscapes is to be satisfactorily enlightened of its meaning and truth.

In brief, we need to understand that Scripture's imagery originated in lived human experience, in the culture, customs, and lands of the ancient Middle East, far removed in time and place from our own. This highlights the importance of injecting ourselves into that culture and customs to be effective interpreters of Scripture.

Style & meaning

Finally, a note about the importance of recognising an author's writing style. In the field of fashion, style comes from the choices people make of their clothes. So, in writing, style comes from the choices writers make with the words they use. Style is the author's thumbprint—a unique and indelible mark on the voice and personality of the work ([Glatch](#)).

Also, [Bandy](#) (2010) says that the meaning of a written text is intimately related to both genre and structure. 'Genre' (pronounced like *jonra*) essentially means the literary clothes that hang on the structure, or in other words, the author's writing style.

Specifically, the author's style is the manner in which ideas are presented. This artistic dimension includes words, sentences, tone, imagery, symbols, similes, metaphors, allegories, points of view, figurative language, mood, narrative, history, biography, figures of speech, poetry, wisdom, dramatic literature, short stories and tales, prophecy, apocalyptic, gospel, oratory, and letters.

The 66 books of the Bible were written in different literary styles. If we don't discern the style of a book, or part thereof, we will miss out on the author's intention. Almost half of the Bible is narrative or story, the most universal form of human communication, that takes events and puts them in chronological order with interesting characters for the reader or listener to detect the author's meaning and purpose.

The next largest style in the Bible is poetry, which accounts for about one third, and uses colourful images and metaphor to help us see the world from a different perspective. That's why there are songs, and pithy wisdom sayings that best express the imagination and emotions of the writers.

Finally, the remaining quarter is prose, which is a way of writing that matches how people speak. Here we will find speeches, letters, or essays to persuading the audience with logical reasoning. Good examples of this are the Law, the wisdom literature, and the New testament letters.

And, to make things more complicated, but interesting, some writers combine literary genres. All in all, the Holy Spirit Who oversees the words of God written in the words of men recognises that we have different preferences in our reading. Some readers are verbal, so narrative and prose writings appeal more to them. In contrast, visual readers prefer the image and picture style and so they like poetry, colourful images, metaphor, symbols, and similes.

Conclusion

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We noted that everything has *structure*, and my interest in this introductory sandwich paper is in the structure of texts. *Structure*, or the organisation of ideas that an author brings to his work, is one of the features that is critical to interpretation.

In biblical texts, one particular structural technique favoured by writers is the "inclusio", which is a literary device that frames a body of text with similar beginnings and endings. An "inclusio" is also known as a bracket, an envelope, or a bookend. By using this device, the two outer parts highlight the central theme, informing and shaping the reader's understanding of the middle section. I prefer to call inclusios, colloquially, 'sandwiches'.

One well known example of the "inclusio" is Psalm 8, where the first and last verses are exactly the same: *O self-existing One, our Sovereign, Ruler, our King, how majestic is Your name in all the earth.* The Lord is independent of all for His existence. This is the grand theme. In the centre of the psalm, in the sandwich filling, David shows that all else, creation and even human rulers depend on Him.

In addition to structure, setting and style are factors important to correct understanding of an author's work. 'Setting' is the use of the physical spaces, the culture, and customs of the ancient Middle East to communicate the Bible's message.

Finally, 'style' is the author's thumbprint, a unique and indelible mark on the voice and personality of the work derived from the choices writers make with the words they use. An appreciation of both setting and style are critical to a correct understanding of the author's intended meaning.

References

Bandy, A.S. (2009). The Layers of the Apocalypse: An Integrative Approach to Revelation's Macrostructure. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 31, 469 - 4.

Glatch, Sean WRITING STYLES: WHAT IS STYLE IN WRITING? December 12, 2022; <https://writers.com/writing-styles>.