

HOW TO FIND THE PURPOSE AND THE PLAN

It is sometimes difficult to determine the author's purpose and plan, but when these are found the work of interpretation is much easier.

- a. Look to see if the purpose is directly stated. If it is not directly stated, look for other clues. Many of the epistles were written to answer questions or deal with problems. As you read the book, these become clear, even though the problem or question may not be directly stated. I Corinthians was written with such a plan. After giving a greeting to the church, Paul wrote concerning specific disorders (problems) in the church. From 1:10 to 6:20 Paul dealt with each problem individually. Then Paul answered specific questions that had been asked concerning their church life. These are found in chapters 7-14. In chapter 15 Paul wrote to deal with confusion regarding the resurrection. Even though the plan of I Corinthians is not directly stated, it is easily determined by a careful reading of the book. The Book of Haggai is an Old Testament example of how knowing the plan helps to understand the purpose of the book. Haggai was the first prophet to prophecy after the Babylonian captivity. He returned to the land for the express purpose of awakening the Israelites to complete the work on the temple. The book of Haggai is a record of four messages delivered for this purpose: [1] A word of rebuke (1:1-15); [2] A word of encouragement (2:1-9); [3] A word of promise (2:10-19); [4] A word of prophecy (2:20-23). By knowing the plan and purpose one can easily see the author's intention and understand how to teach the whole book.
- b. Look for the structure of the book. Paul's epistles frequently follow a standardized organization: Doctrine first, followed by practical applications. The first three chapters of Ephesians are doctrinal; the last three chapters are practical. This means that chapters 1-3 tell us what to believe; chapters 4-6 tell us how to live by these beliefs. Romans has a threefold division: Chapters 1-8 are doctrinal; chapters 9-11 are dispensational (having to do with God's plan for Israel); chapters 12-6 are practical. Notice the marked division in 12:1, "I beseech you therefore brethren by the mercies of God that you present your bodies a living sacrifice." "Therefore" refers back to everything that was written up to that point, and it sets forth a new division for the Book of Romans.
- c. Look for repeated themes and subjects. Matthew's gospel refers to the Kingdom of Heaven several times, because his purpose was to set for the Jesus as the Messiah and evidences that the Messiah was present. I John repeats the phrase, "These things we write unto you" in order to reveal his purpose for writing the epistle.
- d. Once you understand the purpose and/or plan, study each section of the book separately to make sure your interpretation is accurate. The purpose of the author always guides his emphasis in any section of a book or in any smaller passage within the book.