

Manuscript Study Method

Manuscript Bible study is a method developed by Paul Byer¹ many years ago. While it is often used in InterVarsity in group settings such as conferences and retreats, it can also be used very profitably in personal study and preparation for teaching or leading a Bible study. Manuscript study is a method using the inductive Bible study process. Starting our study with a fresh "manuscript" can help us to come to the Bible with a clear perspective. The page layout is devoid of editorial comment, textual notes, cross-references, and other things which may pre-dispose us to look at the Bible through someone else's "eyes." We can focus upon the text itself.

What is a manuscript?

A "manuscript" is a copy of a Biblical passage with no chapter divisions or paragraph divisions. Lines of text are simply numbered, as in poetry. Most of our modern-day translations contain many non-inspired editorial notes and arrangements of text. The original writings, or course, were not divided up into our "chapters" or even verses. Original Greek did not even have spaces between the words, and Hebrew had no vowels! Some editorial decisions must be made to have a translation which is intelligible at all, though in the manuscript method these are minimized.

Some "non-purists" (ouch!) who use manuscript method will include chapter and verse markings in small superscripts, but this is only to accommodate further study which makes use of such reference works as concordances.^[2] These should be ignored except for purposes of cross-referencing.

What do I do with it?

Most devotees of manuscript study go at it armed with high-lighters, crayons, or multi-colored felt tip markers. They high-light, underline, draw circles and boxes, bracket, draw arrows—often reaching rather advanced stages of art. They color code different things they find significant. There are no rules for how to mark up a text—do whatever is helpful for you. The wide margins and extra space between lines in a manuscript allows room for taking notes. Text is printed on only one side of the sheet, which makes it possible to place sheets alongside of each other for comparison purposes. Some manuscript fanatics will lay out an entire book or large passage on a big table to look for larger recurring themes or patterns.

I need more ideas of what to mark.

A good place to start is to color-code recurring words or phrases, comparisons and contrasts. It may be helpful to mark sharp breaks in action, or a switch to a different literary type (such as a parable or poetry). Literary phenomena are generally the easiest to spot -- such things as metaphors, repetition, rhetorical questions, chiasm or parallelism (if you know what that is), exaggeration, shifts in plot, time or setting, symbols, etc.

Grammatical phenomena might be noteworthy: do you notice what seems to be an important command (imperative)? A change in subject, tense, speaker, mood? Important conjunctions such as "therefore" or "since"? In addition to literary and grammatical features of the text, you might also look for logical structure (categories, relations, arguments). How are ideas grouped together? What is the "flow" of ideas (i.e. how does one thing relate to the next)?

A final, more technical note.

Manuscript study can provide surprising insights in the hermeneutically important consideration of "context." It is a tool of literary analysis, finding its most obvious application to the study of narrative, but is also very useful for New Testament epistles or letters.

Pedagogically speaking, a truth discovered is more motivating and better remembered than a truth imparted, and manuscript study has a high yield of "discovered" truths.

¹ Bob Powell, "Color Me Meaningful" *HIS Magazine* (1986).

^[2] In our Romans manuscript study we use chapter and verse indicators (instead of line numbers) so that we can talk about Romans with others using the most common way of referencing the text. But we will try not to let these reference markers influence our understanding of the text.]