

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #57:
JOTS AND TITTLES: THE IMPORTANCE OF
BIBLICAL PUNCTUATION

By John Temples

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, *one jot or one tittle* will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Matthew 5:17-18).

What on earth are jots and tittles? A jot (or *yod*) was the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. It resembled an apostrophe (‘). A tittle was even smaller, and was a little “horn” or pen stroke on the end of a letter, rather like a serif on a letter in the English alphabet. The NIV does a good job of rendering the sense of Matthew 5:18--“I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” (It’s important to note that the law was fulfilled in Jesus and His sacrifice; so once that sacrifice was completed, and the sin debt was paid by Christ’s blood, the law did pass away and was replaced by the New Testament.)

So Jesus was saying that not even the smallest parts of the law of Moses would pass away until all the law’s requirements were fulfilled. We use similar expressions when we want to emphasize the importance of small details, such as “dotting our *i*’s and crossing our *t*’s.”

Also, in English we have small but important *marks of punctuation*--commas, periods, colons, question marks, etc. Just how important is punctuation to the meaning of a sentence or text? Consider these two pronouncements:

“Let’s eat, Grandma!”

“Let’s eat Grandma!”

That one little comma makes a lot of difference, doesn't it? (Punctuation saves lives!)

Well, if punctuation is important for accurate communication in general, how much more important is it in the text of God's word, the Bible? Sometimes, small punctuation marks in Scripture can make important differences in meanings and doctrine. The purpose of this article is to examine some of those situations.

Before we get serious, though, I have to give you a funny example of mispunctuation of Scripture. Once a young man, not too bright or experienced in public reading of the Bible, was asked by the preacher to introduce the sermon by reading Ephesians 4:28 aloud. That verse says, "Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need." Here's the way it came out of the young man's mouth: "Let him who stole, steal...no longer working with his hands."

HISTORY OF BIBLE PUNCTUATION

It may surprise you to learn that the original Biblical texts, both Old Testament and New Testament, had NO punctuation marks. In fact, the earliest Greek texts did not even have spaces between words! This means that while the words of the original Bible texts are inspired by God, the various punctuation marks that enhance our understanding today (word spacings, paragraphs, quotation marks, chapter and verse markings, etc.) are NOT inspired. They are a result of the discretion and editorial choice of copyists and translators.

Here is some information on the subject from the Internet (emphasis mine, jt):

"The earliest manuscripts of the Old Testament contained no punctuation. The Masoretes, working about a millennium after most of the original writers, formalized a system of punctuation that included sentence-ending marks and various marks within sentences to show major and minor breaks. The evidence suggests that in some cases the Masoretes may have made mistakes in sentence division, but on the whole they did an extraordinarily good job, and their work was a

profound accomplishment. When the translators and editors of the King James Bible and its predecessors applied European punctuation, in most cases they honored the Masoretic sentence endings, because they kept the verse divisions of Stephanus from the previous century. Thus sentences in the King James Old Testament almost always end where sentences end in the Masoretic Text. But *within sentences, the English translators frequently subdivided the text differently....*

Rudimentary punctuation marks began to appear gradually in the sixth and seventh centuries, usually indicating breaks in sentences. It was not until the seventh century that marks for breathing and accents began to appear, and it was not until the ninth century that the continuous writing in the texts began to be broken into individual words.”

(<https://rsc.byu.edu/king-james-bible-restoration/chapters-verses-punctuation-spelling-italics>)

As we noted above, small punctuation marks in Scripture can sometimes make important differences in meanings and doctrine. The purpose of this article is to examine some of those situations. Let’s look at several examples, in order of ascending scale of importance and effect upon meaning of the text.

EPHESIANS 4:12

Ephesians 4:11-12 provides a useful example. In the King James Version (KJV), these verses read, “11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 *For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.*” Notice that the commas in verse 12 delineate three purposes for the work of the officers listed: the perfecting of the saints, the work of the ministry, and the edifying of the body of Christ. In the New King James Version (NKJV), the passage reads, “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, *for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.*” In this version, there is only one comma in verse 12, indicating a two-fold purpose for the work of church officers: equipping the saints for the work of ministry and edifying the body of Christ.

So that you can clearly see the subtle difference here, I've arranged verse 12 sequentially:

- KJV: for the perfecting of the saints...for the work of the ministry...and the edifying of the body of Christ (three purposes).
- NKJV: for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry...for the edifying of the body of Christ (two purposes).

As you can see, the presence or lack of a comma makes a difference in meaning. Is the difference crucial to a correct understanding and application of the text? Not really. But now consider some other examples:

QUESTION MARKS

Sometimes a sentence in the Bible can be construed as either a statement or a question. William Shakespeare said, "To be or not to be? That is the question." A Bible translator could say in regard to a particular passage, "To question or not to question?" Look at Psalms 121:1. In the KJV, it reads, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." As it stands, that suggests that spiritual help and succor come from hills. I've gotten some pleasure and inspiration from looking at hills, but hardly any spiritual strength or insight. Also, that rendering conflicts with the next verse, which says "My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth." The NKJV, and most other modern versions, resolve this disconnect by framing the latter part of verse 1 as a question: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills--from whence comes my help?" In verse 1, the Psalmist is crying out for spiritual sustenance, and verse 2 immediately gives the answer: look to God.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERIODS

A period generally marks where one thought ends and another begins. But when a period is shifted, added, or omitted, the meaning can be changed. An example: "...just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, *that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love*, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ...." (Ephesians 1:4-5). If a comma is placed after the

words “in love” in verse 4 (as it is in most Bibles), then “in love” refers to the previously mentioned Christians: If, however, the comma is replaced by a period, and comes before the phrase “in love,” then these words refer to God, describing the loving way in which God treats believers as his children. The NIV reads: “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. *In love* he predestined us to be adopted as his sons” (Ephesians 1:4–5, NIV). You can see that the two different punctuations make a big difference in meaning: in one, it is Christians who are said to love; in the other, it is God who loves.

Another important placement of a period in the Biblical text is in regard to 1 Timothy 3:14-16. Here is the way it reads in the NKJV. Most other modern versions read similarly:

“These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, *which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth*. And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory.”

Zero in on this part of the text: “...the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” *Pillar* is the Greek word *stulos*, which means a post, pillar, column, or prop supporting the structure of a building. *Ground* in Greek is *hedraioma*, meaning the base, ground, or foundation of a structure. So, the way the text reads in almost all of our English Bibles makes the church the basis, foundation, and source of authority for truth.

But isn't it the opposite? Isn't the truth the basis, authority, support, and foundation of the church? The truth is the truth whether the church teaches it correctly or not.

What if we repunctuate the text this way? (Remember, we can do that, because punctuation was not part of the original inspired text.) “I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church

of the living God. [Period] *The pillar and ground of the truth, and without controversy great, is the mystery of godliness....*” This makes the “pillar and ground of the truth” the “mystery of godliness”--the series of truths given by Paul about the nature and mission of Jesus. In repunctuating, we have not changed one word of the text; rather, we have simply exercised editorial discretion in the placement of periods and commas. To me, this makes better sense. I simply cannot agree with Albert Barnes, who says in his commentary, “[The meaning is that] the stability of the truth on earth is dependent on the church.”

Whether we can agree on the punctuation of 1 Timothy 3:15 or not, I think I’ve proved my point: that punctuation of the Biblical text is important!

EXCLAMATION POINTS TO INDICATE IRONY

One more example of the importance of punctuation is the figure of irony. Irony is a form of speech in which words are used in such a way that their intended meaning is different from the actual or literal meaning of the words. In other words, when you say one thing but mean the opposite, you are using irony. Writers and speakers use irony for dramatic or humorous effect. For example, someone steps out into a storm and says, “What nice weather we’re having!”

Here are some examples of irony in Scripture:

- “No doubt you are ‘the people,’ and wisdom will die with you” (Job’s retort to his so-called friends, who smugly insisted that his suffering was because of sin, Job 12:2).
- “So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with gladness. And so it was, when those bearing the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, that he sacrificed oxen and fatted sheep. Then David danced before the Lord with all his might; and David was wearing a linen ephod.... And Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and said, ‘How glorious was the king of Israel today, uncovering himself today in the eyes of the maids of his servants, as one of the base fellows shamelessly uncovers himself” (2 Samuel 6:12b-20).

- “So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him. And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. Then they said, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ And they struck Him with their hands” (John 19:1-3).
- “You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us — and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you!” (1 Corinthians 4:8. Paul was rebuking the Corinthians for their being “puffed up” against him--see verses 3-7.)

How do you know when irony is being used? It’s important to know, especially in interpreting the Bible, because what you hear or read is precisely the opposite of the meaning intended. In conversation, irony is detectable by the tone or inflection of the words spoken, or the immediate circumstances. But detecting irony in written text can be difficult, because you have no verbal cues.

We have two main clues to help us detect irony in Scripture: (1) an indication, either by context or actual statement, that something is being said in mockery; or (2) the relatively modern practice of insertion of exclamation marks by the translators. To see how exclamation marks make the presence of irony clearer, compare the KJV rendering of 1 Corinthians 4:8 with the NKJV. The NKJV places exclamation points to denote irony, the KJV does not.

CONCLUSION

I hope this discussion of punctuation in Scripture has made you more aware of the importance of proper punctuation to an accurate understanding of Scripture. I think this quote I found on the Internet states the situation very well:

“While punctuation marks are not part of the original, inspired text of Scripture, they do generally assist our understanding of the words of Scripture. Most modern readers need delineated sentences and the clues punctuation provides in order to understand what they read. It would be possible to translate the original languages of the Bible without punctuation marks, but it would cause more problems than benefits for modern readers. We should be thankful for the diligent

work of translators who know the grammatical rules of both the source language and the target language. The goal of a modern translation is to provide an accurate, accessible, and understandable copy of God's Word, and punctuation is a necessary part of reaching that goal."

(<https://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-punctuation.html>)

--John Temples