

INTRODUCTION TO SLOW FOOD AND SLOW PAUL ETC

Slow Food

These sets of questions, which it is hoped are appropriate for busy teachers and others with a limited time for Bible reading, break down a passage of Scripture into short manageable sections with one open-ended question on each section. The questions explore a single point of interest in each section rather than attempting a full expository analysis. Cross-references chase up ideas in the section; they are listed in Biblical order, and normally restricted to three – for abbreviations see the front of any Bible. In the Old Testament studies these references may help us relate the passage to our faith in Christ even if his name is not mentioned. The first person singular is normally used, in order to encourage personal application; for group study it can be pluralised. Studies may be combined as desired.

Slow Paul (etc)

So far so good – but what about Slow Paul (and the other letters)? What exactly is this all about? A book that has stayed with me ever since I was given it as a Confirmation present by my godmother is George Seaver's *The Faith of Edward Wilson*. The Antarctic explorer Edward Wilson, who perished with the other members of Scott's expedition in 1912, was a deeply thinking Christian man who took his New Testament with him to the South Pole and while on board the *Discovery* used to read it in the crow's nest high up on the mast in the early morning. He wrote to his sister: 'I believe my early morning readings are the secret of my own happiness in life. Read chiefly the New Testament ... *and write out what you think each verse means in your own words as you read it*' (Seaver *Faith of Edward Wilson* p14, italics mine).

This practice of rewriting Scripture freely in one's own words starts alarm bells ringing with some, but it has a long and honourable place in the Jewish tradition of *midrash*, where the writer (often fancifully) imports their own thoughts and ideas into the sacred text. I don't pretend to know much about the various genres of *midrash*, far less to have read any in the original. But they seem to have been a mixture of translation, paraphrase, commentary and meditation, while often preserving the persona of the original writer and trying to get at what was going on in that writer's own mind.

Thus *Slow Paul* (etc) attempts a loose, free-range recasting of the original text which tries to reproduce the author's thought processes as if in his own words. It seeks to bring to the surface the imagery latent within his words, the assumptions he may have been making and the logical steps in his argument he may be suppressing. This has involved stretching out the letter to many times its original length, and often departing from the strict and narrow path, rather like an off-piste skier cruising off the main track and exploring the countryside around while never quite getting completely lost (or hitting a tree!).

There are anachronisms and phrasing that the NT authors couldn't possibly have used, though I have tried to hold these in check. Most of the imagery is derived from the picture-language explicit in the text or latent in e.g. Paul's mind. There are spasmodic cross-references to other parts of the Bible, including passages in the NT that hadn't yet been written. It is an attempt to think with the grain of Scripture; to bring out and make plain the underlying drift of meaning, without replacing Scripture itself. This is the bottom line: the original text as inspired by the Holy Spirit is sovereign, the rest is hermeneutics (the in-word for 'interpretation').

As for outside help, I ought to acknowledge that though I have tried to think through the text without consulting other works beforehand, I may consciously or unconsciously have drawn upon writers and teachers named in the list of commentaries, or encountered at some stage in one's life. Needless to say, none of them should be held responsible for any distortions or misinterpretations in what follows. The text of the *New International Version* (revised 2011) is printed at the head of each section for ease of checking back to an authorised translation. Those who have the original Greek may wish to refer to that. Section headings have been inserted, not to break the flow but to allow readers to catch their breath.

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