

'You give them something to eat'

The Manuscript Bible Study Method

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Manuscript Bible Study is a study method developed by Paul Byer on the west coast of the USA as part of a summer training programme for students. Terrell Smith, a former IVCF staffworker who now heads up the international students ministry of the SMD, Germany, introduced the method to Europe where it has been well received by both staff and students. The following article is adapted by Terrell from a paper based on work by Paul Byer, Bill Syrios and Stan Slade of IVCF-USA.

What is Manuscript Bible Study?

As the name suggests, Manuscript Bible Study (MBS) is a study of the plain text of Scripture in manuscript form (ie unencumbered by verse and chapter markings, paragraphs, headings or footnotes). This format has the advantage of allowing students to study an entire book or section of Scripture as a whole literary unit, starting 'from scratch' and drawing their own conclusions about the flow of the argument and the meaning of the text. It is essentially a process of interaction between each student and the Scripture, a voyage of discovery in which the individual charts his own course through the Scripture and checks out his personal discoveries against the findings of others in the group as the study proceeds, on the basis of what is actually there in the text.

Literature students thoroughly enjoy this manuscript method because of its emphasis on careful textual study; lawyers do, too, perhaps because it is a kind of 'detective work'. But not all students will take to it so well. Nevertheless, a full length MBS seminar allows room for the leader to encourage each individual student in his researches. Since MBS puts priority on personal discovery and doesn't require any particular pattern of leadership, it seems to cross cultures easily. (Eric Miller reports that students in Malaysia, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Norway have all got excited over Manuscript Bible Study.)

Why do Manuscript Bible Study?

There are many good reasons. Bob Powell in [His](#) (Feb '86) says, 'For me, manuscript study was a fresh, creative approach that made Scripture come to life. MBS has helped me and others shed preconceived notions - and often be gripped by the big picture behind specific passages for the first time.'

MBS encourages you to take a fresh look at familiar Scriptures because of the unfamiliar format and the absence of interpretive clues such as chapter headings. The individual student does his own detective work, and shares his discoveries with others in such a way that the whole group is caught up in the adventure of following the trail to its final destination.

Where to start?

You can use the MBS method on any passage of Scripture, but a good place to start is the Gospel of Mark. Why begin with Mark? There are several practical reasons which make this Gospel particularly suitable for MBS:

- a) The book lends itself to two one-week study sessions, Mark I (1:1 -8:30) and Mark II (8:31 - 16:8).
- b) The content of Mark I lays a solid basic foundation for Christian life and action.
- c) The intensive study in Mark I builds excitement and confidence in the truth and authority of all Scripture, including the Old Testament.
- d) Mark I lends itself to teaching inductive Bible study methods. By working systematically through the text, the student is drawn on from one section to the next so there is motivation to spend the time necessary to develop good inductive study skills. Method is secondary to content, but a method is nevertheless learned.
- e) The Mark study is reproducible. By the end of a week, many students have enough of an excitement about Mark to want to share it with someone else. Since the method of study was not a barrier to them, they believe that they can teach someone else the same content. So they go out and do it.

How do you conduct a Manuscript Bible Study Seminar?

Timing

Ideally a Manuscript Seminar runs for a week, ie, six days of intensive study, involving at least 30 hours of work. The advantage of this concentrated time is that there is little loss of momentum in tracing ideas from the start of the study sequence to the finish. Since the chapters of Mark are studied consecutively, students learn to read the Gospel as a complete literary unit.

Study skills are learned by doing. The week gives good opportunity for students both to develop and practice their skills.

The study can be conducted in shorter once-weekly sessions, but experience has shown that the impact is never the same as in the concentrated week-long seminar. If the study is to be done on a once-a-week basis, begin it with a concentrated weekend 'Bible dig-in'. (See below).

Text

Manuscript study uses a prepared, typed, manuscript-style text of the book to be studied. (See boxed example.) It is double-spaced, with wide margins, printed on one side of the paper only and leaving off chapter and verse markings, paragraph indications, special headings and footnotes. It is probably best to use either the RSV or the NIV, but you'll need to be careful about obtaining permission from publishers to reproduce the text. (Manuscript versions (RSV) of a good many biblical texts are available from IVCF, Manuscript Order, P0 Box 40250, Pasadena CA 91104-7250, USA. You will be billed for cost of manuscripts, plus mailing and handling charges.)

The advantages of the manuscript format are:

- a) Equality Since everyone has the same text, and only the text, there is a sense of equality among participating students. Regardless of any previous study of the text, markings or footnotes in their favourite Bible, only those who work on this manuscript will have contributions to make as the study progresses. Naturally some carry past understanding of the text with them, but they will quickly learn that only those interpretations which can be supported from the text in front of them are valid.
- b) Discovery With chapter, verse, and more importantly, paragraph divisions left out, each person must start by reading the manuscript with enough care to discover how the sentences, which are the basic building blocks of the text can be grouped together into meaningful paragraphs. This forces attention on the meaning of the words and sentences within their own context.
- c) Accessibility Since the text is printed on only one side of the paper, pages can be placed side-by-side or end-to-end, thus removing artificial divisions and permitting the text to be treated as a continuous whole. In this way the surrounding context of any section is readily accessible, allowing the student to check whether his reading of the part is warranted by the whole.

Togetherness

Each MBS seminar develops a life of its own and is a community undertaking. The process depends on a determined effort on the part of participating members to break out of pre-determined, habitual patterns of interpretation. The community serves both as a stimulus and a check on the study process. In addition it may serve as a catalyst for application of the message by creating an open and receptive atmosphere.

On a practical note, you should divide the whole group into sub-groups of 5-8 each, and sit each small group around a table with plenty of working space for each member. Each small group needs a leader: either one asked beforehand or selected by the group.

The role of the small group leader is relational. He co-ordinates discussion times and is sensitive to the members of his group, but as he does not teach a method of study or content, he need not have been through the study previously. Once each day, usually in the morning, the members of each small group meet together. They become acquainted, share concerns, and pray with, and for, each other. These small group times give opportunity to deal with personal problems which could hinder the study, and may prove to be the very context where the application of the study needs to be acted on in faith. Generally 25-30 minutes are spent in small groups.

The small groups could take turns to start the plenary morning session with a hymn and prayer. In the evening, a small group could be responsible for leading a 20-25 minute time of corporate worship and prayer. The groups are free to be as creative as possible during these times, and can relate the material, as appropriate, to the content of the study. Some groups may put on a skit to dramatize the content in some way, make a poster, or write a song.

Techniques

An MBS operates at three levels: individual study, small group sharing and whole group discussion, all, of course, surrounded by prayer. Each section of the study will involve, first, a period of personal detective work on the text, followed by small group sharing and questioning around the table. Finally, the whole group discussion allows opportunity for sharing findings, raising difficulties, cross-questioning and double-checking conclusions reached.

1. Marking up Mark

Students spend from 20-35 minutes in personal study of each section. Arm them with coloured pencils and have handy a dictionary, a Bible dictionary, a concordance and a whole Bible for tracking down Old Testament references, etc. (NB Reference works should be used as an aid only. Students should be encouraged to pursue their own researches and look at a commentary or a dictionary only when they are in difficulty. Incidentally, at some point during the seminar, the leader may like to include a short explanation of how to use such tools to best effect.) Encourage them first to read over the whole section and decide on paragraph divisions, perhaps giving an overall title and sub-headings to each part. Next, make them focus on the details by looking for eg repeated words and themes, contrasts, comparisons, key words, etc. (Refer them to the reference books where anything is unclear or obscure.) The coloured pencils provide a useful means of colour-coding particular themes and making links. Any questions provoked by the text should be written in the margin. In this way notemaking does not take the student away from the text but leads him further into it. (The slogan becomes 'marking up Mark'.) Some students who would not mark up their Bible find freedom to do this on a printed manuscript sheet. This working of the text facilitates study, and the marking of the text helps to make quick associations within it, and to retain and recall the ideas already discovered. (See example.)

Specific places in the text are referred to by page and line. This in itself helps to free the student and the text from past associations. It opens him up to new and possibly better meanings.

In international conferences in which students may be using manuscripts in different languages, it is especially important to keep the same page and line numbers in all of the texts.

2. Small Group Sharing

After the period of private study, members of the small group will need to talk about their discoveries with each other. This reinforces their observations, corrects mistaken conclusions and focusses attention on the major issue or question raised in the section under consideration. The leader at each table co-ordinates this sharing time.

3. Whole Group Discussion

After 15-25 minutes of small group sharing, the seminar leader calls the whole group together and, asking his own questions or taking questions from the students, gets everyone to look again at the text. Based on the observations of their study, the whole group works together at developing a satisfactory understanding of the text.

It is helpful to use the blackboard or an overhead projector at this stage to summarise findings. The leader also needs to be alert to the responses of different students: some may be experiencing frustration or fear; others may be locked into their personal prejudices. But again, the advantage of this method is its flexibility in allowing a sensitive leader to fit the study to the needs or interests of individual students.

a) Development of Ideas

As sentences are tentatively grouped into paragraphs, students discern the flow and development of ideas within the text. Encourage students to make connections. How does the meaning of each paragraph contribute to the overall theme? Does the analysis have coherence or should their tentative paragraph divisions be re-examined?

The study is a constant interaction between 'what does the text say?' and 'how does it say it?'. How do the parts fit into the structure of the whole? And does the overall thrust of the text justify the meaning assigned to the part, be it word) sentence or paragraph? It is this interplay between the smaller units of text and the overall context which leads naturally on to the final conclusion about the meaning of the whole.

Similarly, the rhythm of individual study, small group sharing and whole group discussion - all on the basis of what is there in the text - provides a stimulating context in which to sharpen observations and guard against idiosyncratic readings of the text.

b) The Leader's Function

The leader's own interaction with the text in the group discussion becomes a live model of the study process. He must welcome each contribution. Those based on accurate observations can be incorporated into the meaning being developed. Those which are more of a guess than a fact, can be met with a question, which forces everyone back to the text to determine what is actually there. Ideas not supported by the text must be dropped.

The key is to maintain the freedom for anyone to ask any question, so long as it pertains to the text under consideration. Also any answer is valid so long as it comes from the text. However, whether it is the best answer, may have to be determined by how well it fits in and contributes to the overall meaning being developed at this point in the text.

Once the students have participated in this study cycle several times, they carry the freedom to ask questions of the text, and the process of searching for the best answer, back into their personal study. Thus there is fairly rapid development of a personal study process. No one is told what he has to do to get the meaning from the text, but each person discovers for himself what he can do. He learns what to do by doing it, and is motivated by the satisfaction of discovering meaning in Scripture.

The leader's overall function is to act as co-ordinator and guide throughout the study sequence. Although in one sense his task is 'merely' to gather observations, to probe with questions, to make syntheses, draw conclusions, and link sessions together, in actual fact his responsibilities go far beyond that.

Yes, the students make their own discoveries, but the leader will also have done his personal preparatory study of the book in question. He will need not only to give an introduction to Mark's Gospel and clear instructions at the start of the seminar but also to summarise and underline principles of Bible study (exegesis, interpretation and application) as they emerge during the course of the study. The advantage of the manuscript method lies precisely here: principles are explained after the students have done their own personal study; they emerge from actual practice rather than being taught as theory.

The leader also needs to be sensitive to the reactions of participants in the seminar: he may be required to give -variously - reassurance, encouragement, coaxing, discreet guidance through the procedures of the MBS, while at the same time preserving students' freedom to feel that the study is all their own work. For some students the seminar may mean a great upheaval in their previous thinking about Bible study. He must also be sensitive to the leadership of the Holy Spirit, encouraging an expectant attitude of prayerful listening to the Word of God and ensuring that lessons learnt and insights gained are truly applied in students' lives. (Besides personal and small group application mentioned above, it may be possible to develop applications of the study in other ways, eg getting students to write and use an evangelistic Bible study guide on the basis of their discoveries; using a personal daily learning sheet to help them process the application of each day's study, etc.)

Target

The target, or goal, of an MBS seminar is limited: it attempts to discover the essential meaning of the book or passage being studied, and to call people to obey it.

As mentioned above, a technique of study is acquired in the process, but this is not the goal, even though it is a significant, sought after byproduct. Methods of Bible study vary because, in part at least, they are culturally shaped. But the call to obey Jesus Christ is constant. Our understanding of Scripture will be opened up, or blocked, more by our obedience than by our study methods.

How to plan a Manuscript Bible Study programme

The two programmes described below can easily be adapted to fit other schedules.

The one-week MBS seminar

1. General All seminars begin Saturday evening and end the following Saturday after breakfast. There is a time of worship on Sunday morning. Wednesday afternoon and evening are free, and there should be time for recreation each afternoon.

2. Daily Schedule:

0700	Wake up	1230	Lunch
0730	Breakfast	1630	Afternoon session*
0815	Quiet Time	1745	Supper
0900	Small groups	1930	Corporate worship
0930	Morning session*	2000	Evening session*
		2145	Close

* Breaks are taken at appropriate times.

Facilities

It is essential that students should be able to work at tables. If enough cannot be provided for week-long use, which is best, then dining tables can be used. (This requires setting the tables up for meals after each session, and the students cannot leave their things on the tables, but this is still better than not using tables at all.)

Good lighting is also necessary. A blackboard or OHP is useful; so is a pencil sharpener. Students can be encouraged to bring an A4-sized binder, coloured pens or pencils, a Bible, and if they have them, a Bible dictionary and concordance. Otherwise these should be available for purchase on the booktable, or 'on loan', one of each for each small group if possible. If manuscripts are not pre-punched, a hole punch is useful.

The weekend Bible dig-in

Students who have been in a Manuscript Bible study seminar may want to get together with others and have a manuscript study during the school year. These are called Bible Dig-Ins.

Usually they are held in a local church, or possibly in a student centre. One group may organize it and invite other groups in the area.

Sections offered

For those who are new to the study method or to Christianity, a section in Mark, covering the first 6-9 pages is offered.

Since some students will have already studied Mark's Gospel, they can tackle other appropriate sections eg Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' prayer in John 17,

early chapters of Acts, Philippians, II Timothy, Titus, I John, Ruth, Habakkuk, Malachi, or selections from the Psalms.

Schedule

A suggested schedule for a short 'Dig-In' is:

Friday evening	Saturday
1830 Arrive	0845 Breakfast
1900 Plenary session for orientation	0900 Sections meet
1930 Different sections meet	1200 Lunch
2200 Close	1430 Afternoon session
	1730 Supper
	1900 Sections meet
	2030 Close

Facilities

As for the one-week MBS seminar (see above). Meals may be purchased in the local student cafeteria or simple meals could be prepared. Local graduates or a family may wish to help by cooking the meals. Visiting students could stay with the host group's students, or in a church hall, or nearby homes. A small fee should cover the cost of the manuscripts and meals (if provided).

Although the total time is much shorter than a week-long seminar, a weekend Dig-In proves to be very beneficial, and often creates much interest in the week-long seminar.

A sample Manuscript:

1 who has will more be given; and from him who has not, even
 what he has will be taken away." And he said, "The kingdom
 of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground,
 and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should
 5 sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of
 itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain
 in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in
 the sickle, because the harvest has come." And he said,
 "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable
 10 shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which,
 when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds
 on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the
 greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that
 the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." With many

15 such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to
Respond to His Word!!
 hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable, but
 privately to his own disciples he explained everything. **P** On
 that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go
 across to the other side." And leaving the crowd, they took
 20 him with them, just as he was, in the boat. And other boats
 were with him. And a great storm of wind arose, and the waves
 beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.
 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke
 him and said to him, "Teacher do you not care if we perish?"
 25 And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea,
 "Peace! Be Still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a
 great calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you
no faith?" And they were filled with awe, and said to one
 another, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?"

see Ps. 107:23ff

STORM ON SEA

having sown word - Jesus can sleep

FAITH

Is Jesus being harsh with them to expect such faith? No! He gave this word - respond to it! (L. 18)

hopeless situation

death.

what Jesus says is important

first time disciples ask this question

fear came after Jesus calmed the sea