

# 'PARSING':

## What do *I* mean by parsing?

From the *Seventh Edition*  
of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*:

**parse** *v.t.*

- 1) describe (word in context) in terms of grammar, stating inflexion, relation to sentence, etc.
- 2) resolve (sentence) into its component parts and describe them in terms of grammar.

I begin by saying that neither of the above definitions describes my work of 'parsing'. To me, definition 1) looks like an exercise for its own sake, and definition 2), though it is a little better, is one that I would want to re-couch.

I read 'parsing' essentially as 'part'-ing, by which I mean that the function of parsing is first and foremost the discerning of 'parts' and the *understanding* of them fully. But, of course, 'parts' can be defined only in terms of their relation to 'wholes'. The 'whole' has to be defined as well as the 'part'. Definition 2) appears to assume that we have defined a 'sentence' already, but if I read the definition correctly, that the use of the word 'sentence' is exemplary, it is not only the sentence, but also the whole paragraph, the 'chapter' and the whole book that have to be defined. In terms of the study of New Testament Greek manuscripts and texts, a 'book' is all that we can properly delineate first of all, not a chapter, or a paragraph, or even anything like all of the sentences. (Is there one verb or two or more in the sentence?)

The earliest New Testament manuscripts that we have display no sentences at all. They do not even display words as such, but only letters, some spaces and some indentations. (This you may have known before reading the preceding article.) If a New Testament scholar, therefore, accepts unquestioningly that the capital letters and full stops in the translation he/she is using are delineations of sentences *that the writer intended*, then he/she is accepting unquestioningly someone else's interpretation of the earliest manuscripts. I, for one, am not prepared to do that! Parsing of the New Testament texts, requires that, as part of the process, sentences, and paragraphs, etc., as well as the clauses that make up the sentences, have all to be defined, properly, from all the manuscripts and all the manuscripts' columns of letters (or as a short cut, from an up-to-date edition of the Greek text, *ignoring* all its punctuation, spaces and lines).

Given my experience of 'parsing' New Testament texts, the work of 'parsing' is begun with identifying a part, then another part, and so on, and establishing *only after* that what is the 'whole', the sum of the parts. This *appears* to be the opposite of Definition 2. The 'parsing' exercise goes on and on until all the 'wholes' that constitute the whole work are defined.

Now we come to my most important point of dissatisfaction with the definitions above. In the analysis of New Testament texts, parts are to be *known* not for their own sake, or to be *defined* only as an exercise in itself.

Knowing and defining 'parts' is but one element of work in a much greater exercise. Satisfaction in 'parsing' comes not *with* defining a part 'in terms of grammar', but, *because* we can define it in terms of grammar, we can, therefore, *understand* the way each part functions within a whole. Ultimately, of course, we can then describe a whole text. And if we do the work correctly, we will all be able to describe it in exactly the *same way* as each other.

My particular area of work is about resolving *whole books* into their component parts. It is more than a work of 'parsing' only. My analytical method begins first of all with a reading of the text for its contents and its emphases. It continues with a search for any signifiers of structure. An exploration then follows into the writer's choice of style and his (her?) use of rhetorical conventions. It is after this stage that I 'parse' a whole text, *because* at this point, by close scrutiny of the grammar, I can *confirm* earlier proposed sectional divisions, or *resolve* difficulties. Parsing is a part of the process of analysing a text.

Given my particular usage, to 'parse' is to resolve any text into its component parts and describe them in the ways that they function (in terms of their content, grammar and position). It is parsing with a purpose and as such it is my modification of definition 2) above.