

GENERAL LAWS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION
PART 2-THE FOUNDATIONAL RULES
THE BIBLE MUST BE INTERPRETED GRAMMATICALLY!

Introduction

We began last week by looking at **THE SUPREME RULE OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION**– “*INTERPRET SCRIPTURE WITH SCRIPTURE.*” Scripture is its own best interpreter! A passage of the Bible should be interpreted by comparing it with other parts of the Bible.

Now let’s look at **THE FOUNDATIONAL RULES OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION.**

Following the **SUPREME RULE** are two **ESSENTIAL RULES** which must be consistently observed in all Bible interpretation.

THE BIBLE MUST BE INTERPRETED GRAMMATICALLY!
THE BIBLE MUST BE INTERPRETED HISTORICALLY!

THE BIBLE MUST BE INTERPRETED GRAMMATICALLY!

By this we mean that **SCRIPTURE** is to be **INTERPRETED** according to the **USUAL MEANING OF ITS WORDS** and the **NORMAL RULES OF GRAMMAR.**

There is no more **BASIC PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION** than this –the violation of which can only result in literary anarchy.

In this regard, there are three “**LAWS**” which must be applied.

I. THE LAW OF “DIRECT STATEMENT.”

A. The Law Stated.

Every passage of **SCRIPTURE** is to be understood **LITERALLY** and taken to mean exactly what it says unless it is **PATENTLY OBVIOUS** from its **IMMEDIATE CONTEXT** or **EMPLOYMENT OF OBVIOUS FIGURES OF SPEECH** that it bears another meaning. (*i.e. If the plain sense makes common sense, seek no other sense or it will all become nonsense.*)

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B. Examples Of This Law.

1. Israel Is Israel.

There is absolutely no warrant for making **ISRAEL** of the **Old Testament** to be the **CHURCH** of the **New Testament.**

2. Canaan Is Canaan.

Despite the popularity of a number of hymns, the **Believer** is not bound for the “*Promised Land*” or “*Canaan’s happy shore.*” *Heaven* is the final destination of the *Child of God!*

Canaan always refers to the literal land forming part of the **STATE OF ISRAEL.** According to *Zephaniah 2:5*, *Canaan* (but certainly not *Heaven*) will face terrible desolations in the **DAY OF THE LORD.**

Even when making a spiritual *application* (not *interpretation*) of **ISRAEL’S** crossing over *Jordan* into *Canaan*, the parallel is not *Heaven.* Rather, *Canaan* would represent the *place of victory, blessing and rest* (i.e. the *abundant life*) that the **victorious Believer** enjoys now in **CHRIST.** (*Heb. 3:11-4:11*)

3. Zion Is Zion.

Zion is the hill upon which *Jerusalem* is built. (*2 Samuel 5:7*)

It is often used interchangeably with “*Jerusalem.*” (*Psalms 147:12*)

It is used in a heavenly sense with the *New Jerusalem.* (*Hebrews 12:22*)

However, it is **not** the *Church* and it is **not** *Heaven!*

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4. **One Thousand Is One Thousand.**

Although numbers may have symbolic meaning, unless this is clearly evident all numbers must be taken at their face value.

In *Revelation 20:2-5*, the “... *thousand years...*” means a **literal 1000 years**, not some indefinite period of time or eternity.

We should take every word in its **primary, ordinary, usual meaning** unless the **facts of the CONTEXT** indicate clearly otherwise.

II. **THE LAW OF CONTEXT.**

A. **The Law Of CONTEXT Stated.**

Every passage of SCRIPTURE must be studied in the light of its CONTEXT.

Any **TEXT** taken from its **CONTEXT** becomes a **PRETEXT**. In studying the **CONTEXT** of a passage of Scripture it is necessary to consider the following:

1. **Consider The IMMEDIATE CONTEXT.**

That is, the CHAPTER in which the passage is located.

Every verse in the Bible has something which either precedes it and/or follows it. This is the **IMMEDIATE CONTEXT** and it is of the utmost importance when properly interpreting a **TEXT**.

An oft-repeated story is told of a discouraged businessman who finally turned to the Bible for guidance.

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He randomly opened the Book and placed his finger on Matthew 27:5– “And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.”

Thinking this “advice” to be not very helpful, he tried again, this time landing on Luke 10:37 “...Go, and do thou likewise.”

Becoming frustrated, the man tried once more. This time he turned to John 13:27– “...That thou doest, do quickly.”

We find that humorous but it illustrates the serious error of taking a verse completely out of its **CONTEXT** and ending up with the wrong message or doctrine.

That is one of the “*methods*” employed by the cults.

2. **Consider The SECONDARY CONTEXT.**

That is, the Book in which the passage is located.

Each Book in the Word of God has at least **one** major theme. This theme should be kept in mind when interpreting a particular text.

For Example:

1 Corinthians deals with Church order.

Galatians deals with correcting the *Judaizers*

(i.e. Those wanting to mix law with grace.)

1 Timothy is a Pastoral epistle.

Deuteronomy is the second giving of the Law

Malachi is the preaching of a *post-exilic prophet*.

Ecclesiastes deals with a search for the meaning of life from a human standpoint.

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3. **Consider The BROAD CONTEXT.**
That is, the Testament in which the passage is located.

Consideration of the text's location within the whole Bible may bring to bear **historical, dispensational, and prophetic factors.**

4. **Consider The TOPICAL CONTEXT.**
That is, the parallel passages in other sections of the Bible.

A text dealing with a particular subject should also be compared with other Bible passages dealing with the same theme. **This may be done through:**

- a. **Word cross-referencing**
(by use of a *Concordance*)
- b. **Subject cross-referencing**
(by use of a *Topical Index*)

5. **Consider The DOCTRINAL CONTEXT.**
That is, the relative DOCTRINAL passages of the WORD OF GOD.

Texts which are DOCTRINAL in nature should never be isolated from other passages which deal with the same teaching. It is also important to remember that no fundamental doctrine of the Bible rests upon one or two "proof texts," rather, they are based upon many passages (some central and some peripheral) which fit together to make a harmonious whole.

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- B. **Examples Of The Law Of CONTEXT.**

1. Jehovah's Witnesses will take *Job 7:9* to prove their doctrine of annihilation. In so doing, they have wrested this verse from:
Its IMMEDIATE CONTEXT—Which relates Job's experience from an earthly perspective—see *verses 10 and 21.*

Its SECONDARY CONTEXT—Because Job believed in a life after death—see *14:12-15; 19:25-27.*

Its BROAD CONTEXT—Because Old Testament saints who died did not enter into the presence of the Lord until after the resurrection of Christ—see *Ephesians 4:8-10.*

Its DOCTRINAL CONTEXT—Because the Bible teaches a conscious life after death. *Luke 16:19-28.*

2. Several cults use *Ecclesiastes 3:18-22 and 9:5, 10* to teach soul sleep and annihilation. The **SECONDARY CONTEXT** (i.e. the whole Book of Ecclesiastes) is "*life under the sun,*" i.e. life in the apparent sense.

Solomon's conclusion (*12:13-14*) clearly teaches life after death.

3. The end of *Philippians 2:12* taken out of its **IMMEDIATE CONTEXT** would teach salvation by works. However, *verse 13* explains what is really meant: the salvation which is in us by the grace of God is a salvation that must work its way out into all aspects of our lives.

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4. The judgment described in *Matthew 25:31-46* does not refer to the separation of saved and lost at the Great White Throne judgment prior to the beginning of the eternal state. The **CONTEXT** shows this to be a judgment of the nations which will occur at the second coming of Christ (*verse 31*) in the valley of Jehoshaphat (*Joel 3:18*) prior to the Millennium (*verse 34*). The saved will not appear at the *Great White Throne* judgment.
5. The Mormons take *1 Corinthians 15:29* out of **CONTEXT** as the basis of their practice of “*being baptized for the dead*” – i.e. proxy baptism for salvation.

The **CONTEXT** is extremely important to the understanding of this verse.

- a. **The Chapter deals with the subject of the resurrection.** It begins with Christ’s resurrection, ends with the believer’s resurrection, and in the middle deals with the consequences of there being no resurrection.
- b. The words “*the dead*” are found 3 times in verse 29 and 11 other times in the chapter.
- c. If there be no resurrection (*verse 13*):
 - 1) Our Christ Is Vain. (*Vs 13, 16*)
 - 2) Our Preaching Is Vain. (*Vs 14*)
 - 3) Our Salvation Is Vain. (*Vs 14c, 17-18*)
 - 4) Our Hope Is Vain. (*Vs 20*)
 - 5) Our Warfare Is Vain. (*Vs 30-32*)
 - 6) Our Holy Living Is Vain. (*Vs 32d-33*)
 - 7) Our Baptism Is Vain. (*Vs 29*)

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- d. Baptism pictures death and resurrection. In rising from the waters of baptism, the believer declares both the resurrection of Christ and the certain hope of his own resurrection. The “*else*” of *verse 29* asks the question: “*Why would anyone be baptized if there is no resurrection?*”

Baptism in such a case would have to be a permanent immersion.
6. Determining the **CONTEXT** often solves Bible difficulties.
Joel 3:10 speaks of beating plowshares into swords, etc., but *Isaiah 2:4* speaks of beating swords into plowshares.

Any apparent contradiction is dissolved by understanding from their **IMMEDIATE CONTEXTS** that these two verses relate respectively to before and after the second coming of Christ.
7. Many times a word or phrase is modified or limited by the connection in which it appears, and requires a study of the **CONTEXT** to determine its meaning. **e.g. The word “law” in the book of Romans has a number of meanings, which are determined by the context, or setting.**
 - a. Mosaic Law—*Romans 2:14* (first 3 mentions); *Romans 2:20, 23*.
 - b. Natural Law—*Romans 2:14* (last mention)
 - c. Intuitive Law—*Romans 2:15*
 - d. Rule—*Romans 3:27f*
 - e. Principle—*Romans 7:21*

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e.g. The word “for” in Acts 2:38 is the key to understanding this verse on the purpose of baptism. Those who believe in baptismal regeneration interpret “for” to mean “in order to” to support their doctrine.

However, the word “for” can also mean “because of.”

If we say that a man was imprisoned for theft, we do not mean that he was put in prison *in order to* commit theft, but *because of* theft.

In *Luke 5:14* both usages of the word “for” are found. Interpreting *Acts 2:38* as “...*be baptized ever one of you [because of] the remission of sins...*” is totally consistent with the many other Scriptures which clearly refute any notion of baptismal regeneration.

III. THE LAW OF LANGUAGE.

Contrary to the claims of some, the Bible is **not** to be interpreted literally in absolutely every part. Although most of the Scriptures are in the form of direct (literal) statements, the Bible also uses figurative or non-literal language.

A. The Law Of Language Stated.

Words should be understood in a literal sense, unless such an interpretation involves a clear contradiction or absurdity.

The use of symbolic or figurative language in the Bible does not absolve the interpreter from using the literal approach to interpretation.

All non-literal language must be based upon literal words for it to make sense.

B. Examples Of Non-Literal Language.

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Some of the Bible is written in ways other than by direct statement—in types, parables, symbols, and figurative (non-literal) language.

Recognizing this fact requires each of these to be subject to the rules of interpretation applicable.

1. Simile.

A *simile* is a *figure of speech which shows comparison*.

The purpose of using *similes* is to represent truth in a graphic form. The “key” to identifying *similes* is the word “like” or “as.”

e.g. Simile in the Bible:

Exodus 24:17—...was like a devouring fire.

Psalms 2:9—...like a potter’s vessel.

Psalms 11:1—Flee as a bird to your mountain.

Psalms 68:13—...as the wings of a dove...

Psalms 102:6—...like a pelican...like an owl...

Song of Solomon 2:9—My beloved is like a roe.

Isaiah 1:8—... left as a cottage in a vineyard...

Isaiah 1:18—...your sins be as scarlet...

Matthew 18:3—...become as little children...

1 Peter 5:8—...the devil, as a roaring lion...

Revelation 9:5-10—Note the several uses of “as” and “like” in this passage.

2. Metaphor.

A *metaphor* is a *figure of speech which also shows comparison, but which does so by asserting one object to another object*.

e.g. Metaphors in the Bible:

Psalms 18:2—The Lord is my Rock...

Psalms 22:6—But I am a worm...

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Psalms 57:4—...whose teeth are spears...
Proverbs 7:4—Say unto wisdom, Thou **art** my sister.
Hosea 7:8—Ephraim **is** a cake not turned.
Hosea 10:1—Israel **is** an empty vine...
Luke 13:32—Go ye, and tell that fox...
Luke 22:19—This **is** my body....

Much controversy has arisen from a failure to recognize *metaphoric* language.

2 Timothy 2:21—“...he **shall be a vessel** unto honour”

The “**I AM**” titles used by the Lord Jesus Christ in John’s Gospel are all examples of *metaphors*.

Berkhof points out that God is often described *metaphorically*...

By anthropopathisms (where human emotions are ascribed to God. *e.g. Genesis 6:6; Deuteronomy 13:17; Ephesians 4:30*)

And by anthropomorphisms (where human physical characteristics are ascribed to God. *e.g. Exodus 15:16; Psalms 34:16; James 5:4*)

3. Allegory.

An allegory is an extended metaphor.

Allegories are similar to parables, the main difference being that a parable uses literal language, whereas an *allegory* uses *metaphorical* language.

e.g. Allegory in the Bible:

In *Psalms 80:8*, the nation of Israel is called a “*vine*”—a *metaphor*. *Verses 9-16a* develop this *metaphor* into an historical account of Israel from the Exodus to the Monarchy.

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Another example of an *allegory* is found in *Galatians 4:19-31*, where the true story of Sarah and Hagar is used to illustrate the difference between Grace and Law.

4. Metonymy.

A metonymy is a figure of speech in which a word or expression is used in place of another word or expression to which it is related in either cause or effect.

e.g. Metonymy in the Bible:

Isaiah 22:22—“And the **key of the house** of David will I lay upon his shoulder...”

Here, the **key of the house** represents the *effect* of having the key, *i.e. control* of the house.

Luke 16:29—“They have **Moses and the prophets** ...” Here, the term “**Moses and the prophets**” stands for the **Word of God**— Which was *caused* by Moses and the prophets as God’s instruments.

Acts 22:16—“...be baptized, and **wash away thy sins**...”

Since we know from other Scriptures that baptism does **not** wash away sins, and since we know Paul was born again **before** he was baptized, we identify this as a *metonymy*. Here, the “**washing away of sins**” comes from the *effect* of that which baptism pictures, *i.e. identification in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ*.

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5. **Synecdoche.**

A synecdoche is a figure of speech in which the whole of a thing is put for a part, or, the part of a thing is put for the whole.

For example, the *genus* may be put for the *species*—or the *species* put for the *genus*.

e.g. Synecdoche in the Bible:

Genesis 2:16—“Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:” Here the whole (tree) is put for the part (fruit).

Matthew 6:11—“Give us this day our daily bread.” Bread, a part, stands for essential food (the whole).

Acts 27:37—“And we were all in the ship two hundred threescore and sixteen souls.”

Here, the part (soul) is put for the whole (persons—body, soul, and spirit.)

6. **Hyperbole.**

Hyperbole is a figure of speech which uses exaggeration or overstatement to express an idea.

Extreme caution must be exercised when identifying *hyperbolic* passages in the Word of God—do not overlook the fact that God is able to do all things.

e.g. Hyperbole in the Bible:

Genesis 22:17—“...thy seed as the stars...as the sand”

This does not mean that there will be exactly the same number of descendants of Abraham as there are stars in the heavens or grains of sand on all the sea shores—it does mean that innumerable descendants would spring from Abraham.

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2 Chronicles 27:4—“...he built cities in the mountains...in the forests he built castles...”

Clearly, this does not mean that King Jotham built cities in every mountain and castles in every forest. It is a statement of how his kingdom thrived.

John 21:25—“...I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books...”

This is an expression used to describe the many works of Christ.

7. **Irony.**

Irony is a figure of speech which contains censure or ridicule under the cover of praise or compliment.

e.g. Irony in the Bible:

1 Kings 22:15

Job 12:2

1 Corinthians 4:8, 10

In some cases, *irony* may be considered as *sarcasm*—*e.g. 1 Samuel 26:15; 1 Kings 18:27; Amos 4:4.*

8. **Personification.**

Personification is a figure of speech in which impersonal objects are given personal characteristics.

e.g. Personification in the Bible:

Psalms 22:17—“...they [my bones] look and stare upon me.”

Psalms 68:16—“Why leap ye, ye high hills?”

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9. **Idioms.**
An *idiom* is *a figure of speech peculiar to the language and customs of the people.*
For example, where the Bible speaks of *heaping coals of fire on someone's head*, it refers to the practice in Bible times of carrying coals for starting fires in containers placed upon the head. To the Western mind, this Scripture would have the exact opposite meaning— harming one's enemies by being nice to them, rather than being nice to them in spite of their being an enemy.
10. **The Ellipsis.**
When a sentence omits a word and requires the reader to “fill in the blanks,” the omission is called an *ellipsis*.
- e.g. Ellipsis in the Bible:*
Genesis 3:22—The Lord God's words are not finished; *verse 23* indicates what they would be.
Exodus 32:32—“*...if thou wilt forgive their sin*”
Psalms 6:3; 90:13—“*...O Lord, how long?*”
The reader would add in his mind “*before You act.*”
11. **Euphemisms.**
A *euphemism* is an expression which substitutes for another, usually to produce a softening effect.

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e.g. Euphemism in the Bible:
One notable example is the *euphemism* for “*death*” when it concerns the **BELIEVER**— “*sleep.*”
Acts 7:60; 1 Corinthians 15:51;
1 Thessalonians 4:13-15

12. **Litotes.**
Litotes are figures of speech in which a thing is affirmed by the negation of the opposite. Instead of saying, “*He is strong,*” a *litote* would express it this way: “*He is not weak.*”

e.g. Litotes in the Bible:
Psalms 51:17 and *Isaiah 42:3.*

A number of other kinds of non-literal language and speech forms may be identified—such as *epizeuxis* (emphasis by word repetition) or *oxymoron* (a figure of speech in which apparently contradictory terms appear in conjunction)—but these are of incidental concern to the interpreter of the Word of God.

Conclusion
THE BIBLE MUST BE INTERPRETED GRAMMATICALLY!

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THE BIBLE MUST BE INTERPRETED HISTORICALLY!

The **BIBLE** is a **HISTORICAL BOOK** with a **HISTORICAL SETTING**; accordingly, it can only be **FULLY UNDERSTOOD** and **PROPERLY INTERPRETED** in the light of **HISTORY!**

Each portion of **SCRIPTURE** must be **UNDERSTOOD** in its **ORIGINAL HISTORICAL SETTING**:

1. The **HISTORICAL SETTING** includes any **BACKGROUND** or **KNOWLEDGE** about the **AUTHOR**.
(i.e. What are we told about the **AUTHOR** in the **SCRIPTURE** or from other dependable **HISTORICAL** sources?)
*(e.g. What we **KNOW** about the **APOSTLE PAUL** can help us greatly as we **INTERPRET** what he wrote!)*

2. The **HISTORICAL SETTING** would include **KNOWLEDGE** about **OTHERS** mentioned in the **TEXT**.
It includes not only the **AUTHOR** of the **BOOK**, but...
WHOEVER ELSE may be **SPEAKING** within the **BOOK?**

The **HISTORICAL SETTING** includes the **AUDIENCE**.
(That is, who was it originally written for?)

3. The **HISTORICAL SETTING** includes the **CULTURAL BACKGROUND**, the **PLACE**, and the **SITUATION THAT PROMPTED THE WRITING OF THE TEXT!**

Many errors in **INTERPRETATION** occur simply because the reader **INTERPRETS** according to his or her own **EXPERIENCES** and present **CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING**.

Proper INTERPRETATION of **SCRIPTURE** seeks to **UNDERSTAND** the **SCRIPTURE** in the way the **ORIGINAL AUDIENCE** or **RECIPIENTS** would have **UNDERSTOOD IT!**

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Having said that, we must **UNDERSTAND** that the **HOLY SPIRIT** can **REVEAL** to us that a **HISTORICAL PERSON, EVENT, or OBJECT** was a **TYPE OF CHRIST** or had some **DEEPER MEANING** which the **ORIGINAL AUDIENCE** may not have **DISCERNED**.

So, those who would seek to **INTERPRET** the **BIBLE** must also seek to have a **GOOD KNOWLEDGE** of **BIBLE GEOGRAPHY, BIBLE HISTORY**, and an **UNDERSTANDING** of the **MANNERS** and **CUSTOMS** of the **BIBLE LANDS, PEOPLE** and **TIMES**.

But generally speaking, the **HISTORICAL** and **CULTURAL SETTING** is **KEY** to **PROPER INTERPRETATION**.

e.g. THE BOOK OF JONAH

*God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and call the Assyrians to repent. However, Jonah rebelled against God's Word and fled in the opposite direction. **To better understand the narrative, knowing the background of Assyria is crucial as is knowing the history between Israel and Assyria.***

*These nations were bitter enemies. In fact, Assyria would some decades later conquer the Israelites and force them into exile. **The nations' histories show us why Jonah despised the Assyrians so much and longed for their destruction.** Additionally, understanding their histories also makes Assyria's repentance at Jonah's preaching even more miraculous.*

A great **KEY** for **UNDERSTANDING** the **HISTORICAL SETTING** on any passage of **SCRIPTURE** is to faithfully apply...

The "**Five Point Question Rule.**"

1. **WHO** is speaking or writing?
2. To **WHOM** is it being spoken or written?
3. **WHAT** is being spoken or written about?
4. **WHEN** is it being spoken or written?
5. **WHY** is it being spoken or written?

We could also add to this **WHERE** is it being spoken from and to?

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The more one is familiar with the **WHOLE COUNSEL** of **SCRIPTURE** (from **GENESIS** to **REVELATION**), then the more the **ANCIENT CULTURES** become familiar to us leading to more accurate **INTERPRETATION**. *(i.e. The more we read, study, and become familiar with the Word of God, the better we become in interpretation!)*

How can we begin to find these things that we're talking about?

1. Having a good study Bible is a good place to begin!
2. Bible Handbooks, Dictionaries, etc.

Someone wrote the following:

*"Wherever you look within this Book, Five things observe with care: Of **WHOM** it speaks, and **HOW** it speaks, and **WHY**, and **WHEN**, and **WHERE**." (Author Unknown)*

Kipling wrote:

*"I had me six serving men
Who taught me all I knew
Their names were '**What**'
And '**Where**' and '**When**'
And '**How**' and '**Why**'
And '**Who**.'"*

John Wycliffe wrote:

*"It shall greatly help ye to understand Scripture if thou mark. . .Not only **WHAT** is spoken or written but **OF WHOM**, and **TO WHOM**, with **WHAT WORDS**, at **WHAT TIME**, **WHERE**, **TO WHAT INTENT**, **WITH WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES**, **CONSIDERING WHAT GOETH BEFORE AND WHAT FOLLOWETH**."*