

Section 4: EXAMINING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

I. Introduction

- A. Each book of the Bible was written to specific readers in a specific historical situation for a specific purpose.
- B. Because the goal of Bible interpretation is to determine what the biblical author intended to communicate to his original readers, it is essential to reconstruct the historical background of the passage under consideration.

Robertson McQuilkin: “The Bible is revelation in history, unlike the teachings of many religions. Some religions are rooted in mythology, such as Shintoism or Hinduism. Others were founded by a historic individual, but large elements of their religious teachings today are mythological, such as in Buddhism. In contrast to those, Scripture is rooted in history and claims to be a historical document, the record of God’s self-revelation to man. As such, we must understand it in the context of its history.”

Walt Kaiser: “It is exceedingly important that the interpreter complete a thorough investigation of the Biblical book’s author, date, cultural and historical background. It is virtually impossible to locate the book’s message in space and time without this essential material.”

William Klein: “For any interpretation to qualify as the intended meaning of a text, it must be the most likely meaning given the circumstances of the original writing and reading of the passage. Any suggested explanation of a passage that would have been inconsistent with or inconceivable in the historical or cultural setting of the author and recipients cannot be valid.”

II. The Need for Reconstructing the Historical Background

- A. If we attempt to understand a written communication without an understanding of its historical background, oftentimes what we read will not make sense.

EXAMPLE: *Try to understand the meaning of the political cartoon below without the aid of knowing its historical background.*

¹ Notes compiled from The Master’s Seminary and Matt Waymeyer Hermeneutics course, *Grasping God’s Word* (Duvall and Hays), and *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Roy Zuck).



The Historical Background: The cartoon was written in 1884, the same year Grover Cleveland ran as the Democratic candidate for president. Cleveland was a popular candidate because he was regarded a man of integrity who was honest and trustworthy. In fact, he even became known as “Grover the Good.” In the July 21 issue of the “Buffalo Evening Telegraph,” however, a story titled, “A Terrible Tale,” revealed that Cleveland had fathered an illegitimate child in an affair with a widow from Buffalo. Cleveland’s Republican opponents responded by taunting him with the slogan, “Ma, ma, where’s my pa?”

- **Big idea:** all communication has a historical context because, by God’s design, we are creatures who exist, not in a vacuum, but in time on earth with other human beings. If we do not understand the historical context into which a piece of communication was given, we will fail to understand the meaning of the communication.

- B. The same is true in studying the Bible. Because Scripture is rooted in history and is therefore a historical document, we must understand it in the context of its original historical background.

- C. Sometimes ignorance of the historical background of a passage or book of the Bible makes it impossible to understand the intended meaning of the biblical writer.

EXAMPLE: Much of Lamentations makes little sense unless one understands that Jeremiah was writing a

funeral dirge which laments the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

- D. Other times, however, the meaning of a given passage will be *somewhat* understandable without an awareness of its historical background, and yet knowing that background will often clarify the meaning of the passage.

EXAMPLE: The Historical Background of Jeremiah 3:6-10:

Jeremiah 3:6-10: (6) Then the LORD said to me in the days of Josiah the king, "Have you seen what faithless Israel did? She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there. (7) I thought, 'After she has done all these things she will return to Me'; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. (8) And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also. (9) Because of the lightness of her harlotry, she polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. (10) Yet in spite of all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to Me with all her heart, but rather in deception," declares the LORD.

Context: In Deut 27-28, around 1400 BC, the Lord clearly told Israel that should she disobey his covenant commands (as laid out in the Torah), he would punish her. Fast-forward to 931 B.C., and the nation of Israel was divided into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. The Northern Kingdom was called "Israel" and included the ten northern tribes, and the Southern Kingdom was called "Judah" and included the two southern tribes (Judah and Benjamin). In 722 B.C. the Northern Kingdom "Israel" was conquered by Assyria and taken into captivity (2 Kings 17:6) as a judgment from God for her apostasy (2 Kings 17:7-23). About one hundred years later – from 641 to 610 B.C. – Josiah reigned as king of the Southern Kingdom "Judah." It was during Josiah's reign ("in the days of Josiah the king" in v. 6; more specifically in the 13th year of his reign – 628 B.C. – according to 1:2) that the Lord spoke these words to Jeremiah.

- What insight does this simple historical background provide?
- What might God mean when He says He sent Israel away and gave her a writ of divorce (v. 8)?
- Why does God remind Judah of the fate of her sister Israel?

III. Tools for Reconstructing the Historical Background

A. The Bible

Waymeyer: “The process of reconstructing the historical background of any given passage of Scripture starts with reading Scripture itself and inductively piecing together the historical circumstances which form the background of that particular writing. This can usually be done by simply reading that particular book of the Bible repeatedly and looking for clues which help in the reconstruction process. Other times, however, there will be indications in the text that the historical background of the passage can be found elsewhere in Scripture.”

EXAMPLE: The superscript above Psalm 63 (*A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah*) indicates that the psalm was written by David while he was in the wilderness, or desert, of Judah. As we consider the life of David as recorded in Scripture, we find that there are only two periods in his life that this could be referring to – early in his life when he was fleeing from King Saul (1 Sam 23:14) or later in life when he was fleeing from his son Absalom (2 Sam 15-17). Both times David was in the desert of Judah, and both times someone was seeking to take his life (which fits with v. 9). The deciding factor comes in verse 11 where David refers to himself as king. Because David was king during this later episode but not the earlier one, Psalm 63 must have been written when he was fleeing from Absalom. For this reason, the historical background of Psalm 63 can be found in 2 Samuel 15-17.

B. Commentaries

Most Bible commentaries include a discussion of the date, author, recipients, circumstances, and purpose of the book in the introduction. The following resource is helpful in identifying the best commentaries for each book of the Bible:

- Jim Rosscup, *Commentaries for Biblical Expositors*. The Woodlands, Tex: Kress Christian Publications, 2004.

C. Bible Background Books & Study Bibles

- The MacArthur Study Bible (provides historical background for all 66 books of the Bible and comment on most verses).
- Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998.

- Gleason L. Archer, Jr. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*. 3rd ed. Chicago: Moody, 1996.
- D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992.
- Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 3 vols. Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1975-77.
- Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*. Rev. ed. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990.

D. Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

- *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd edition. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996.
- *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 volumes. Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.
- *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996.
- *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984.
- *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5 volumes. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975.
- *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 volumes. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

E. Bible Atlases and Geography Books

- Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*. Rev. ed. New York: Macmillan Co., 1977.
- Denis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible: A Study in Historical Geography*. Rev. ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

STUDY REMINDER:

Waymeyer: “As you consult various resources listed above, determine whether they include insights that you missed in your own inductive reading of Scripture. If there are significant differences between your own observations and those in one of these resources, read through the

book of the Bible again with that resource in hand and determine the reason for the difference. As you make these comparisons, recognize two things: (1) Some scholars provide extra-biblical, background information that is helpful in the process of interpreting Scripture, but (2) other scholars have tendencies toward speculation and therefore make questionable connections between extra-biblical literature and the text of Scripture. Because it is not always easy to discern between the two, be conservative in your approach and only affirm those connections that are unmistakable. Furthermore, if various scholars disagree, evaluate the arguments they present for their views.”

III. The Goal of Reconstructing the Historical Background

- To reconstruct the historical background of a passage, we seek to understand the original circumstances of that book of the Bible, that passage, and the writer.
 - We attempt to reconstruct the circumstances of the events SO THAT we can discern the facts; truth; what happened
 - This is the way that humans function in all cultures of all time when it comes to a crime scene, a mess in the house, or an archaeological setting.
 - Reconstructing circumstances is not a set of rules or principles that anyone crafted. Rather, it is the logical process, discerned through God’s natural light given to us, by which humans understand we can discern truth.
 - Therefore, the same goes for understanding historical writings. And, therefore, one principle of Bible interpretation is the **historical, contextual hermeneutic**.

Roy Zuck: “This means looking for answers to these questions: Who wrote the book? At what time was it written? What prompted the author to write the book? That is, what problems, situations, or needs was he addressing? What is the book all about? That is, what is its main subject or subjects? To whom was the book written? That is, who were the first readers or hearers of the book? Answers to these questions can help us make more sense of what the Bible book says.”

Walt Kaiser: “It is exceedingly important that the interpreter complete a thorough investigation of the Biblical book’s author, date, cultural and historical background. It is virtually impossible to locate the book’s message in space and time without this essential material.”

INTERPRETIVE EXERCISES

From the following verses, seek to determine:

A. The Date of the Book

- Jeremiah 36:2 “And it came about in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, that this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, ‘Take a scroll and write on it all the words which I have spoken to you concerning Israel, and concerning Judah, and concerning all the nations, from the day I first spoke to you, from the days of Josiah, even to this day.’”

B. The Author of the Book

- Philippians 1:1 “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.”
- 1 Timothy 3:14 “I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long.”
- 2 Timothy 2:15 “You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me....”

C. The Recipients of the Book

- Philippians 1:1 “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.”
- 1 Corinthians 1:11 “For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you.”

D. The Circumstances of the Book

- Jeremiah 1:1-3 “The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiyah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the exile of Jerusalem in the fifth month.”

- 1 Timothy 1:3-7 “As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith. But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions.”

- Galatians 1:6-7 “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ.”

EXAMPLE: Observations of 1 Peter indicates that the saints in Asia Minor were undergoing a great deal of suffering and persecution.

Suffering in 1 Peter:

- 1:6: being “distressed by various trials”
- 2:19: “suffering unjustly”
- 2:20: being “harshly treated”
- 2:20: suffering for doing what is right
- 3:14: suffering “for the sake of righteousness”
- 3:17: suffering “for doing what is right”
- 4:12: “the fiery ordeal among you”
- 4:13: sharing “in the sufferings of Christ”
- 4:16: suffering “as a Christian”
- 4:19: suffering “according to the will of God”
- 5:9-10: suffering in general

E. The Purpose of a Book of the Bible

Waymeyer: “Reconstructing the historical background involves a critical step in the process of interpreting a given passage of Scripture: determining the purpose of the book in which it occurs. **The reason this is so essential is because every passage of Scripture must be interpreted in light of how it serves that overall purpose.**”

Sometimes the purpose can be found in a single statement which explicitly states the purpose. More often it must be inferred from statements in the book that contribute to that purpose. Sometimes the repetition of a given theme, phrase, or exhortation in the book can provide helpful insight."

Walt Kaiser: Taking note of the exhortations will often help "determine what applications the author himself has made of the factual and doctrinal portions of the text. Usually an author's exhortations will flow out of his special purpose for writing his book."

From the following verses, what can we conclude about the purpose of the respective books?

- Deuteronomy 4:1 "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you."

Deuteronomy 32:44-47 "Then Moses came and spoke all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he, with Joshua the son of Nun. When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, he said to them, 'Take to your heart all the words with which I am warning you today, which you shall command your sons to observe carefully, even all the words of this law. For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life and by this word you will prolong your days in the land, which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.'"

Observations on the purpose/authorial intent of Deuteronomy:

That God's people, Israel, might be reminded of his commands so that they would faithfully live in his land, generation after generation

- Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil."

Observations on the purpose/authorial intent of Ecclesiastes:

In light of the vapor-like nature of life, we must fear and obey God since judgment is inevitable

- John 20:30-31 “Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”

Observations on the purpose/authorial intent of John:

John’s desire is that his audience carefully read his book so that they would embrace Christ for eternal life

- Hebrews 3:6, 14; and 10:23 “Christ was faithful as a Son over His house whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end...For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end...Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”

Observations on the purpose/authorial intent of Hebrews:

Having professed faith in Christ, the audience must not presume upon a past event, but persevere in loyalty to him so that they would safely arrive in heaven

- Some books have multiple purposes. Typically, however, an overall purpose can be discerned through careful observation.

EXAMPLES:

- **1 John 1:4; 2:1; and 5:13** “These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete...My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin...These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

QUESTION: Which of these three seems to be the *primary* purpose of the epistle in light of 1 John 2:3, 5b; 3:10, 14, 19, 24; 4:13?

The Primary Purpose of 1 John:

2:3: “By *this* we know that we have come to *know* Him...”

2:5: “By *this* we know that we are *in* Him...”

3:10: “By *this* the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious...”

3:14: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, *because...*"

3:19: "We shall know by *this* that we are of the *truth...*"

3:24: "And we know by *this* that He abides in us..."

4:13: "By *this* we know that we abide in Him and He in us..."

Considering that the statement in 1 John 5:13, is at the end of the letter, it reveals the purpose of the book.

- **1 Peter 5:12**

Even when the purpose of a given book of the Bible is stated directly, knowledge of the historical background of that book may contribute to a fuller understanding of that purpose. For example, the closest thing to a purpose statement in the epistle of 1 Peter is found in 1 Peter 5:12: "Through Silvanus ...I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!" When understood in light of all the suffering and persecution that was taking place in the churches Peter was addressing, the purpose of 1 Peter could be stated as follows:

"To establish believers in the grace of God and enable them to stand firm in that grace as they undergo persecution because of their faith in Christ."