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The Historical Setting

I WAS A BIBLICAL STUDIES major in college. One of my favorite professors taught me Old Testament and Hebrew. He was a very dignified, articulate, God-fearing man. He kind of reminded me of an ancient prophet. One Sunday I stopped by his house to drop something off and his wife was getting their six-year-old son, Scotty, ready for church in another room.

In the middle of my conversation with this professor, we heard Scotty scream at the top of his lungs: “I don’t want to go to church! You can’t make me go to church! I HATE CHURCH!!” The face of my very dignified, articulate, God-fearing professor turned beet-red with embarrassment. But he very quietly said to me: “You must understand the *context* of that outburst. You see, Scotty has just been pulled from the sandbox.”

Ahhh! “You must understand the context.” That also happens to be the most important rule for interpreting the Bible. *You must understand the context.* Have you ever heard a skeptic complain, “Oh, people can make the Bible say whatever they want it to say”? That skeptic is absolutely right. People *can*

make the Bible say whatever they want it to say—if they take Bible verses out of context. But that’s a violation of the number one ground rule for interpreting the Bible.

There are ground rules for interpreting the Bible? Yes, there are ground rules for interpreting *any* piece of serious writing, whether it’s the Bible, Shakespeare’s plays, Robert Frost’s poems, or Jane Austen’s novels. Interpreting great literature requires ground rules. The ground rules for interpreting the Bible are called *hermeneutics*.

Herman who? *Hermeneutics* is a Greek word. If you know your Greek mythology, you probably recall that Hermes was the messenger god. He was responsible for conveying information from the gods to humans. So, hermeneutics refers to the ground rules that must be followed in order to ensure that the Word of God, the Bible, is accurately understood by us.

Context is really just a short course in hermeneutics. No matter what your current level of Bible understanding, you need hermeneutics. If you’re not yet a Bible reader because you’re put off by a book that’s set in cultures so vastly different from your own, you need hermeneutics. If you regularly read the Bible but come across passages that leave you asking, “What in the world does this mean?” you need hermeneutics. If you want to hear God speak to you through the Bible but you’re not always certain if you’re reading His thoughts *out* of the text or your own thoughts *into* the text (you see the

difference?), you need hermeneutics. If you belong to a Bible study group in which there are occasionally as many interpretations of a passage as there are participants around the table, you need hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics are the basic ground rules for interpreting the Bible. And all of the ground rules are founded on one important principle: *You must understand the context*. There are four kinds of context that we'll be considering in this section, the first of which is the Bible's historical setting. If we want to interpret the Bible correctly, we have to pay attention to the historical background of every passage we turn to. How do we do that? Let me spell it out in the form of three directives.

Pursue the Objective Facts

Some time ago, I read a book review of a new biography on the life of Ronald Reagan. According to the reviewer this biography contains a lot of fabricated information; the author has made up details about Ronald Reagan's life that are not completely true. However, the reviewer quickly added, the book tells a really good story and is well worth reading. I thought: *Huh? Who wants to read a biography that's not grounded on historical facts?*

Did you know that Christianity is unique among the world's religions in that it is grounded on historical facts? These facts are objective and verifiable. Take away the facts

and the Christian faith crumbles. What *are* the facts? Well, according to the Bible's record, Jesus Christ, God's eternal Son, came to earth as a human being. He did miracles that provided evidence of His deity. Then He died on a cross to pay the penalty for our sins. And three days later He rose from the dead, proving that His sacrifice was effective and that He has the power to give people new and eternal life.

Take away these objective facts and there's not much left of the Christian faith. But that's not true of other world religions. Buddhism, for example, doesn't depend upon the historicity of its founder. It doesn't revolve around the life of *The Buddha*, Siddhartha Gautama, in 500 BC. It revolves around a set of teachings referred to as the Eightfold Path that will lead you to nirvana.

The same is true of Hinduism. Objective facts about Vishnu aren't important. Religious ideas are what hold Hinduism together. The same is true of Islam. Even though we know a lot about the actual life of Muhammad, Islam isn't built on the historical events of Muhammad's life. It's built on the Five Pillars of Faith as revealed in the Quran.

Christianity is the only major world religion that stakes its existence on objective facts. The apostle Paul drove home this point when he summarized the basic content of his teaching in the following verses:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 15:1–6)

What does the apostle Paul say is the core of the Christian faith that he preaches? Christianity is grounded on certain objective facts: that Jesus died for our sins and was buried; that He rose again on the third day; and that scores of eyewitnesses actually saw all this! Take away those historical events and you lose the gospel, the good news of the faith. Take away those objective facts and “you [Christians] have believed in vain” (v. 2).

I heard about a very liberal theologian who was asked the question, “What if it could be proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus did *not* rise from the dead? What if Jesus’

bones were discovered—verifiably—in a first-century tomb?” His reply: “That wouldn’t make any difference to *my* faith. I would still believe that the spirit of Jesus is alive today.”

What do you think about that theologian’s response? I’ll tell you what the apostle Paul would think about it. If we drop down to verse 14 of the passage we just read (1 Corinthians 15), Paul says: “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” Genuine Christianity rests on objective facts.

Now, why am I making such a big deal about this point? What does this have to do with how we approach the task of understanding the Bible? Here’s the reason for the big deal. The Bible’s message is wrapped up in objective facts. If we want to interpret that message correctly, then we need to understand those objective facts. We need to understand the historical setting of whatever Bible passage we’re looking at.

Are you following me? The Bible is *not* a Magic 8 Ball. Remember those? (Mattel, the toymaker, is still making them.) They were originally designed back in 1950 by a guy whose mother was a psychic. You ask the liquid-filled Magic 8 Ball a yes-or-no question, then you turn it upside down and an answer floats to the surface. The answer may be: *Outlook good*; or *Don't count on it*; or *Reply hazy, try again*.

Some people do this with the Bible. They open it to a random passage, hoping that it will speak directly to their lives,

without any consideration of the historical facts behind that passage. If they open, for example, to the New Testament epis-

tle of Colossians, they don't care *who* the Colossians were or *why* the apostle Paul was writing this letter to them. They just want a Magic 8 Ball message for *their* lives. If they open to the Old Testament book of Esther, they don't care *when* this story took place or *what* was going on in Esther's life at the time. They just want to know: What is this passage saying to *me*?

SOME PEOPLE open the Bible to a random passage, hoping it will speak directly. They just want a Magic 8 Ball message for *their* lives.

R.C. Sproul, a well-known theologian and author, tells an amusing story from his days of teaching at a Christian college.¹ One of his female students, a senior, found herself approaching graduation with no man in her life. Many of her friends had serious boyfriends or even fiancés.

So this young woman prayed for a guy. Then she got out her Bible and opened it at random to Zechariah 9:9: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey."

Now, if you know the objective facts behind this verse, you realize that it was written about 500 BC as a prophecy concerning a coming Savior; a prophecy that Jesus later fulfilled when He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey at the

beginning of Holy Week. But this college senior interpreted Zechariah 9:9 as God's promise to provide her with a Prince Charming, even if he showed up on a donkey instead of on a white charger.

This is not good Bible interpretation (as I hope you already concluded). The historical setting of the passage we're reading matters. We must pursue the objective facts.

Cross the Cultural Rivers

One of my favorite *Far Side* cartoons shows a guy lecturing his dog. In the first of two panels, the guy says: "OK, Ginger! I've had it! You stay out of the garbage! Understand, Ginger? Stay out of the garbage or else!" The caption under this first panel reads: *What People Say*. The caption under the second panel reads: *What Dogs Hear*. What does Ginger hear? The thought bubble above her head says: "Blah, blah, blah, blah . . ." In case you missed the point of the joke, there's a formidable communication barrier between people and dogs.

There's even a formidable communication barrier between people when two groups of humans come from vastly different cultures. Have you ever experienced that? Have you ever tried to explain American football to a Brazilian friend, or been greeted with a bear hug by a Russian coworker whom you hardly knew? Or maybe you've been on one of your church's short-term mission trips to Haiti, Czech Republic,

or Bangladesh. And you couldn't understand the language or the local customs.

One of my first mission trips, years ago, was to Amsterdam. Our Dutch hosts welcomed us with a meal. There was a milk bottle on the table that I assumed contained . . . well . . . milk. But as I poured it into my glass, it came out thick and lumpy. I just assumed that the milk wasn't homogenized and that the cream had floated to the top of the bottle. Well, I didn't want to pour it back, so I just drank it. Wow, was it sour!

Afterwards, one of the Dutch hosts asked me, "Is it the custom to *drink* yogurt in America?"

I quickly stammered, "Oh, yeah! Yogurt . . . of course. Love to drink that stuff."

As you read the Bible and *pursue the objective facts* that make up the historical setting of the passage you're looking at, you will also need to *cross some cultural rivers*. What I mean by that is: you will have to travel from *your* side of the river (a twenty-first-century, Western, technological society) to the *other* side of the river. If you're reading, let's say, the Old Testament book of Proverbs, the other side of the river is a tenth-century BC, Middle Eastern, agrarian society. If you're reading the New Testament epistle of 1 Corinthians, it's a first-century AD, Greco-Roman, urban society.

If you don't cross these cultural rivers, you won't understand much of what you read. For example, let's say that

you're reading the Book of Ruth. Ruth is a destitute young widow. But she has a relative named Boaz who wants to help her out. Boaz wants to buy Ruth a piece of property, a place to live. Ruth 4:7 tells us that the guy who sells Boaz the property seals the contract by handing Boaz his sandal.

Now, that makes absolute sense to you, right? I mean, when you purchased *your* home and you went to the closing, didn't the seller hand you his shoe to seal the deal? He didn't? So, what's up with this sandal-passing business? In Ruth's day, this was the way for the seller to say: "The property that I used to walk on as my own now belongs to you." Pretty cool, eh?

We just crossed a cultural river. And we'll have to cross cultural rivers every time we pick up our Bibles, if we want to understand what we read, because we live in a time and place that's vastly different from Bible times and places. Now, you may be thinking, *But I could never do what you just did. That bit about handing over the sandal was amazing. How did you come up with that? Do they teach you that stuff at seminary? Was that from one of your doctoral courses?*

No, I think it was from a footnote in a study Bible. Most study Bibles have an introduction to every book of the Bible that explains the book's historical setting. A study Bible also has countless footnotes on every page that explain cultural phenomena. Think of a study Bible as a bridge that will

enable you to cross cultural rivers. I recommend the *NIV Study Bible* for its wonderful explanatory footnotes. (The *ESV Study Bible* is a close runner-up.)

Ask the Journalistic Questions

I remember taking a class in journalism back in high school. And the teacher drilled into us that every good reporter relentlessly asks the five “w” questions: *Who? What? When? Where? Why?*

These are also good questions to ask whenever we read the Bible. Let me show you how this works. I’ll ask each of the “w” questions for a couple of Bible passages. You’ll quickly see how the answers to these questions help us interpret the passages.

Who Questions. We’ll begin with the Ninevites. Here’s a simple but key *who* question to ask: Who were these people that God asked the prophet Jonah to go and preach to? You probably remember certain aspects of this story. Take a look at the opening verses of Jonah:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship

bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. (Jonah 1:1–3)

Now, it's never a good idea to try and run away from God. You can run, as the saying goes, but you can't hide. Jonah was eventually thrown overboard and ended up in the belly of a giant fish. That's when he decided that obeying God would probably be a good thing to do. So, the fish chucked him up and Jonah reluctantly fulfilled his mission. He preached to the Ninevites.

So, *who* were these guys? Why was Jonah so intent on staying miles away from them? If you don't know the answer to that question, you might assume that Jonah was just being rebellious. He rejected God's assignment because he thought he had better things to do with his time. Was that it? No. Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh because he hated and feared its inhabitants. And we won't understand Jonah's hatred and fear toward them until we know *who* they were.

Unfortunately, the Bible passage we're looking at doesn't give us any details about the Ninevites. But here's the scoop—and it's information that I picked up from the *NIV Study Bible's* introduction to the book of Jonah. Nineveh was the capital city of ancient Assyria. Assyria was the superpower of Jonah's day and the Assyrians were notorious for the brutal way in which they treated the people they conquered. Some-

times they beheaded their victims and stacked up the heads in piles. Other times they impaled their captives on stakes. Or they skinned them alive.

So, if *you* were Jonah and God sent you to the Ninevites, wouldn't you jump on a ship in the opposite direction? You can see how knowing the *who* of a Bible passage enables us to better interpret the text.

KNOWING THE *who* of a Bible passage enables us to better interpret the text.

Let's try another *who* question. Who were the recipients of 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul's famous "love chapter"? I'm sure you've come across the words of this text before. They're often read at weddings. Or they're painted on wall plaques. It's a nice, sweet passage on love. Probably written to a nice, sweet group of people, right? Wrong!

The Corinthians may have been Christ followers, but they were arrogant, divisive, gnarly Christ followers—which is why the apostle Paul had to lecture them on the topic of love. First Corinthians 13 is not meant to be nice and sweet. It's meant to be in-your-face and tail-kicking. And now that you know that little bit of historical background, open your Bible and read verses 1–8 of that passage. I'm sure you'll see the text with new eyes.

What Questions. Reading the Bible will raise all sorts of *what* questions in your mind. For example, you're reading

Psalm 1 and you come to verse 4, where the psalmist describes those who don't meditate on and follow God's Word as *chaff*. Is that bad? Depends on the answer to the question: What is chaff?

Well, *chaff* is the thin, outer husk that surrounds a kernel of wheat. And in the ancient world, farmers would thresh their wheat by beating it up into the air—preferably on a day with a strong breeze. The hard kernels of wheat would fall to the ground and be gathered up. But the thin, outer husks, the useless *chaff*, would blow away. So, if you're not spending daily time in God's Word, the psalmist is warning you that you're wasting your life. Your life is just blowing away.

Here's another *what* question from a different passage: What is a firstborn? You say, "Now that's an easy one. A firstborn is the *first* one *born* into a family." Well, your definition creates a huge theological problem for Christians. You see, the apostle Paul refers to Jesus Christ as the *firstborn* over all creation (Colossians 1:15). According to your definition, Paul would be saying that God gave birth to Christ before He created everything else. But Christians believe that Christ is the *eternal* Son of God. He had no beginning. Maybe we'd better reconsider our definition of *firstborn*.

Let me tell you what's meant by this word. Sometimes the Bible uses *firstborn* to indicate a person's prominence. In the ancient world, a firstborn son was the heir to his father's

fortune. He held a place of honor in the family. He had special rights and privileges. So the expression *firstborn* came to be used as a synonym for

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most prominent one. That's why Psalm 89:27 refers to David as Israel's *firstborn* king. Now, we know that David wasn't the very first king of Israel. Saul was. But David was Israel's *greatest* king.

So when Colossians 1:15 calls Christ "the firstborn over all creation," it doesn't mean that He was the first created being, or that God gave birth to Him at some point in the past. It means that Christ reigns supreme over everything!

When Questions. Let's try a *when* question: When did the apostle Paul write the epistle of Philippians? Before I answer that question, let me tell you why it matters. The theme of Philippians is *joy*. Paul uses that word again and again and again in this New Testament letter. This is an amazing theme considering that Paul wrote Philippians *when* he was in jail! Not only that, he was in jail on trumped-up charges. I don't know about you, but I'm much more willing to listen to what a guy has to say about joy if he is joyful himself, even in the most adverse circumstances.

Here's another *when* question: When did Ruth live? In the most basic terms, that question is answered in the very

first verse of the Old Testament book of Ruth. This is how Ruth 1:1 begins: “In the days when the judges ruled . . .” You say, “Big deal!” Well, let me tell you why it *was* a big deal. I referred to Ruth’s story earlier in this chapter. She was the destitute young widow for whom Boaz bought some property. Ruth was also a very godly, virtuous woman. But she didn’t live in a godly, virtuous culture.

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godly, virtuous culture.**

Ruth lived *in the days when the judges ruled*. The judges were the guys who led Israel before Israel had kings. And it was a dark era in Israel’s history. In fact, the closing verse of the Old Testament book of Judges describes what that period was like with these words: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (Judges 21:25). That’s the world in which godly, virtuous Ruth lived. Have you ever complained about how hard it is to live a Christ-honoring life in a contemporary world that’s irreverent, materialistic, violent, and sex-crazed? Meet Ruth—she can be a role model for you!

Just a footnote to this point about *when* questions. In *Epic*, the first book in the Bible Savvy series, I traced the storyline of the Bible from the beginning of creation (Genesis) to the eternal new heaven and new earth (Revelation). Once you learn that storyline you’ll be able to place people and

events in their appropriate historical settings as you come across them in your Bible reading.

When did Noah build his ark? *When* did Abraham and Sarah have a miracle son? *When* did Solomon rule over Israel? *When* did Ezekiel prophesy? *When* did Peter walk on water? *When* did Stephen get stoned to death? *When* did Timothy pastor a church? Can you place these events on a timeline? Did you know that I arranged the people just mentioned in chronological order? You would if you knew the Bible's storyline.

Where Questions. I'll just give you one *where* question: Where was Laodicea? The quick answer is that the city of Laodicea was located in a region which is part of modern-day Turkey. It was the site of a first-century church. This was one of seven churches to whom the apostle John penned letters, as recorded in Revelation 2 and 3.

John told the church at Laodicea that the risen and exalted Christ had a special message for them. The message was this (and I'll just paraphrase it for you): "Stop being spiritually lukewarm—or I'll spit you out of my mouth." That's not the sort of message that you want to hear from the risen and exalted Christ!

Here's the interesting thing about the language that Christ uses. Laodicea had a problem with its drinking water. The local river was muddy, so drinking water had to be brought in by an aqueduct. The water originated from a nice, cool spring five

miles away, but by the time it traveled all the way to Laodicea it was tepid and unappetizing. One sip and you'd want to spit it out. So, because of *where* they lived, the Christians in Laodicea got Jesus' point when He warned them to stop being spiritually lukewarm.

The Bible raises a lot of *where* questions. It's extremely helpful to find out about places like the city of Jericho . . . the empire of Babylon . . . the Sea of Galilee . . . the church in Ephesus.

Why Questions. I could come up with a bazillion *why* questions to be asked as the Bible is read. But I'll give you just one example so you can understand what I'm talking about: Why did Elijah confront the false prophets of the pagan god, Baal, on Mt. Carmel? (You can read about this showdown in 1 Kings 18:16–40.)

Do you know this story? God's people had defected. Many of them had begun worshiping Baal. So God sent His prophet Elijah to duke it out with Baal's representatives. Elijah challenged them to a duel. These were his terms. Elijah said (my summary), "Meet me at the top of Mt. Carmel. I'll build an altar to my God. You build an altar to Baal. Then we'll both call upon our respective gods to send fire from heaven and consume the sacrifices on our altars. Whichever god answers is the one true God!"

Whoa! That was putting it all on the line. But *why* did

Elijah choose Mt. Carmel as the location for this heavyweight bout? Because Mt. Carmel was considered to be the dwelling place of Baal. In other words, Elijah was purposefully giving Baal home-field advantage. And that made the victory even bigger and better when Elijah's God was the only one who sent fire from heaven.

If we'll learn to ask *who, what, when, where, and why* questions as we read the Bible, we'll be amazed at how much more understandable and impactful God's Word becomes.

The overarching ground rule for interpreting the Bible is this: *You must understand the context.* In this chapter we covered the first of four kinds of context: the Bible's historical setting. How do we get a handle on this when reading Scripture? *We pursue the objective facts, cross the cultural rivers, and ask the journalistic questions.*

Sounds like work. Is it worth the effort? It is, if we want to hear God speak to us!