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How to Study the Bible Lesson 3: Historical Context

Now for the fun part! We start opening those Bibles and really start digging into the scriptures. As a side note, while we are going through this study, you may be tempted to start marking interesting notes in your Bible. I highly encourage this! There is no better way to make the scriptures your own than to fill them with notes you can understand. I do recommend that you get a special, archival quality pen such as a Micron Pigma Pen just for Bible marking. It has been my experience that, if you are using a regular pen, after a few years your notes begin to smear and become illegible. This is extremely frustrating after spending so much time and effort writing them. So, learn from my mistakes and do it right the first time! As you start studying through a book or chapter, I recommend getting a notebook or binder and devoting it to what you are studying. You'll be able to list important information so you can reference it throughout your study. This will also be a valuable resource to check back with if you are teaching a class or studying a related passage.

As we start studying through the scriptures, we will start with a very broad scope and then narrow it down. The first thing that you must consider when you are looking at a particular book or passage is the historical context. This includes the literary and historical context of each book. Both of these things will help us determine how to understand a particular passage. For instance you wouldn't interpret a Shakespearean play in the same way you would the Sunday morning newspaper. In the same way, when we look at one of the gospel accounts we won't see it the same way as a Psalm.

When we read through Scripture it is important for us to understand what we are reading. The basic Biblical divisions go a long way in helping us accomplish this. The Bible, as we have it today, is not in chronological order. Knowing these divisions will not only help us understand where the book falls in world history, it will help us to understand what type of literature it is. In order to communicate to all different kinds of people, God chose to use almost every available type of writing: narrative, history, chronologies, laws, poetry, parables and letters (Fee and Stuart). We will go through a basic outline of the Biblical divisions, but this course is not designed to be a survey of the Bible, so we won't go into as much detail as one could. I encourage you to study and learn more about each of these divisions and their implications. The more you learn, the better equipped you will be in your Bible study.

- **Pentateuch:** Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These books contain the earliest Jewish history and the law of the old covenant. It is important to note that while these books teach us much about the nature of God and of God's plan and promises for us, they are part of the old covenant, which we are no longer bound by. We should not use these books as the sole support for doctrinal issues. These books begin with the beginning of the earth and end with the Jews about to enter the Promised Land. They contain a mixture of narrative, genealogies, and law. While we are not bound by the same law today, it is important for us to understand the old law; doing so can help us make some significant observations about

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the nature of God. Based on historical inferences, we can assume with some certainty that the narrative contained in these chapters took place before around 1400 B.C.

- **Books of History:** Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther. These books are the historical narrative of the Jewish nation from the entry into Canaan (around 1400 B.C.) until Jewish captivity (around 450 B.C.) These books are in chronological order for the most part; however there are some exceptions. Ruth for instance takes place during the time of the judges and 1 & 2 Chronicles overlap 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings. In these narratives, God uses stories rather than letters as examples. These stories teach us who God is and what He does. (Arthur, De Lacy and Arthur) Pay specific attention to characters, locations and events throughout these books. At the end of the narrative, we are not always told if the events that transpired were good or bad; we are expected to judge this for ourselves on the basis of what God has taught us elsewhere in Scripture (Fee and Stuart).
- **Books of Poetry:** Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon. The books of poetry are not in chronological order. As an example Job was probably written before any other book of the Bible. One must understand when reading these books that they rely heavily on poetic symbolism (which we will discuss in depth in future chapters). There are some historical aspects to these books which are literal; however, we must be conscious of

the symbolic nature of the poetry. The writers of these books appeal primarily to our emotions. Instead of using complex arguments based on logic like Paul would, they use images to convey their meaning (Duvall and Hayes 348). Be sure to put your main focus on the image they are trying to express through their writing.

- **Major/Minor Prophets:** Major Prophets- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel. Minor Prophets- Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. The difference between the major and minor prophets is simple; the major prophets tend to be longer and the minor prophets are shorter. The terms "major" and "minor" in no way speak to the importance of the books. J. Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays state in their book, Grasping God's Word: "The prophets serve as the Lord's prosecuting attorneys. They stand before the Lord, accusing and warning the people of the consequences of covenant violation. While there are numerous nuances and sub-points to their proclamation, their overall message can be boiled down to three basic points, each of which is important to the message of the prophets: You have broken the covenant, you had better repent!; No repentance? Then judgment!; Yet there is hope beyond judgment for glorious, future restoration."(373) This section of the Old Testament covers the time period before the divided Jewish nation falls into captivity. Some of the books are written to the northern tribes and some to the southern tribes. It is important to understand that some rely on

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figurative language and some, especially Daniel, utilize apocalyptic language (which we will study in depth in a later chapter).

- **Gospels:** Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. These are the accounts of Jesus' ministry on earth. Each is written from a unique perspective and has a distinct purpose. For instance Matthew was written to convince the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. When you read each of them carefully, their purpose will become apparent. The dates of the historical events that occur in these books are from about 4 B.C. until around 28 A.D. These books should carry much weight when studying doctrinal issues as they contain the words of Christ himself. While the people in the gospels were still under the old covenant, Jesus begins introducing and teaching about the new covenant. When reading these books, pay special attention to what they tell us about Jesus.
- **Church History:** Acts. The book of Acts contains the history of the early church. While the Gospels concentrated mostly on one person: Jesus, Acts focuses on several key church leaders, mainly Peter and Paul. This is the period when the apostles were introducing the new covenant to the world. Events recorded in Acts took place sometime in the middle of the first century. Speeches make up almost one-third of the book so it is very important to know who is speaking and who they are speaking to. (Duvall and Hayes 268)

- **Pauline Epistles:** Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews. With the exception of Hebrews, Paul wrote these Epistles. While possibly written by Paul, the author of Hebrews is unknown. The common link between these epistles is that they are addressed to a specific audience as indicated by their title. Galatians was written to the church at Galatia, Philippians was written to the church at Philippi and so on. It is important to understand the history and culture of the people to truly understand the specific problems addressed in these epistles. Because these epistles were written under the new covenant they are a primary source for the basis of many of our doctrines.
- **General Epistles:** James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude. Instead of being entitled on the basis of audience, these letters are written to a more general audience and bear the name of their author. Also written under the new covenant, these epistles are another basis for many of our doctrines. When studying the epistles, be sure to read the entire letter to understand the complete context of what was written.
- **Prophecy:** Revelation. The book of Revelation is the sole book of prophecy in the New Testament. It does begin with a few short letters to some of the churches of the time. We can learn much from these letters. The rest of the book is written in the apocalyptic style and requires careful study. It is addressed to the

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Christians around 70 A.D. and warns them of their impending persecution.

While understanding where a book falls in the general breakdown of the Bible helps us understand some historical context, there is much more we can learn from the specific historical context of each book. This is particularly important because we often fill in the gaps in the text with explanations and background from our culture (Duvall and Hayes 92).

The first place you should look for historical information is the text itself. Often, specific events, customs and beliefs are discussed directly in Scripture. However, many times it is good to consult outside sources to find additional information. This is one of the few times when opening a commentary may save you time. Because the nature of material you will be discovering will be historical, it will be less likely that an author will put his "spin" on it. Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias are also very helpful in discerning historical background of a book. This is also a time when it is appropriate to use a regular encyclopedia or world history book. Always remember, the events that occur in the Bible are actual historical events and the world history you learned about in school is occurring simultaneously. Many of the names of kings and nations you read about throughout scripture are easily found in secular, historical writing. Also, the more you learn about Biblical and Jewish history as you study scriptures, the easier this will get.

To determine the historical context you need to read, paying specific attention to names of kings, nations, historical events and cultural situations. Many books will state with exactness when the events took place. For example, Esther 1:1-3 states that these events are happening in the third year of the reign of King Xerxes. We know by historical documentation, that the third year of Xerxes reign of the Persian Empire was 483 B.C. Not all of the books will be that

easy, some you will have to determine by battles or specific historically documented events, such as the building of the temple. Don't get caught up in coming up with a specific exact date. It will suffice to know the general time period and what is going on historically and culturally at the time.

So once we have what period of time a book covers, what do we do with that information? Let's use our example of Esther. We know an exact time period and a king's name. First, let's discover what is happening in Jewish history at the time. If you look up Persia in various Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, you will find out that Xerxes father Darius allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. This is a significant fact because we can imply that the Jews that decided to stay were not necessarily the most pious of Jews. This gives an entirely new meaning to the struggle Esther faced when she was deciding to intervene on behalf of her people. Next, let's do a character study of King Xerxes himself. If you look up all Biblical references to him you will find that he was a very proud king and very dependent on his advisers. Looking his name up in an Encyclopedia, you will find that he was very intent on conquering and showing his power over others. Knowing these things, we can then ask questions such as: What would it have been like for young Esther to be married to such a man? Exactly what kind of risk was she taking going before him in the throne room without being summoned?

As you can see, understanding this historical context of the cultures and the people of the time can give us great insight into what exactly is going on in a specific passage of scripture. This helps to turn what sometimes are simply words on a page to us into a true, living, breathing story.

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For your homework this week, I will not give you specific resources to use. The resources I gave you in the first chapter will be extremely helpful; however, feel free to branch out and look in any sources you have access too. The number one rule when doing research is, the more sources the better! If you can find the same information in multiple sources, it is most likely reliable (when it concerns historical and provable data).

Chapter 2: Homework

Exercise 1:

For our first exercise, we will look at another easy one, the book of Daniel. Carefully read the first chapter of Daniel and list any historical references you find (people, time periods, events, nations, etc.)

Based on the kings of the time and the major historical event that took place in the first two verses, when did these events occur?

Who was the conquering king and nation? What can we learn about each that will help us to better understand the characters and their actions in the following accounts (feel free to use some of the information you discovered in the homework from Chapter 1)?

- King:

- Nation:

What implications can we make about the characters and events in this book based on what you discovered?

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Exercise 2:

Now let's take a look at a New Testament example: Acts. Read the first two chapters of Acts and list anything that gives you an indication of when these events took place:

What major event had just occurred and how did this affect the events that transpire in the book of Acts?

What is the significance of the timing of these events (specifically chapter 2) and how did the timing affect the outcome?

Exercise 3:

Read Joel thoroughly and use your sources to discover the historical and cultural context. Write an outline of this information and the implications it would have on this book.
