HOW TO READ THE BIBLE HISTORICALLY

A CRASH COURSE FOR BEGINNERS

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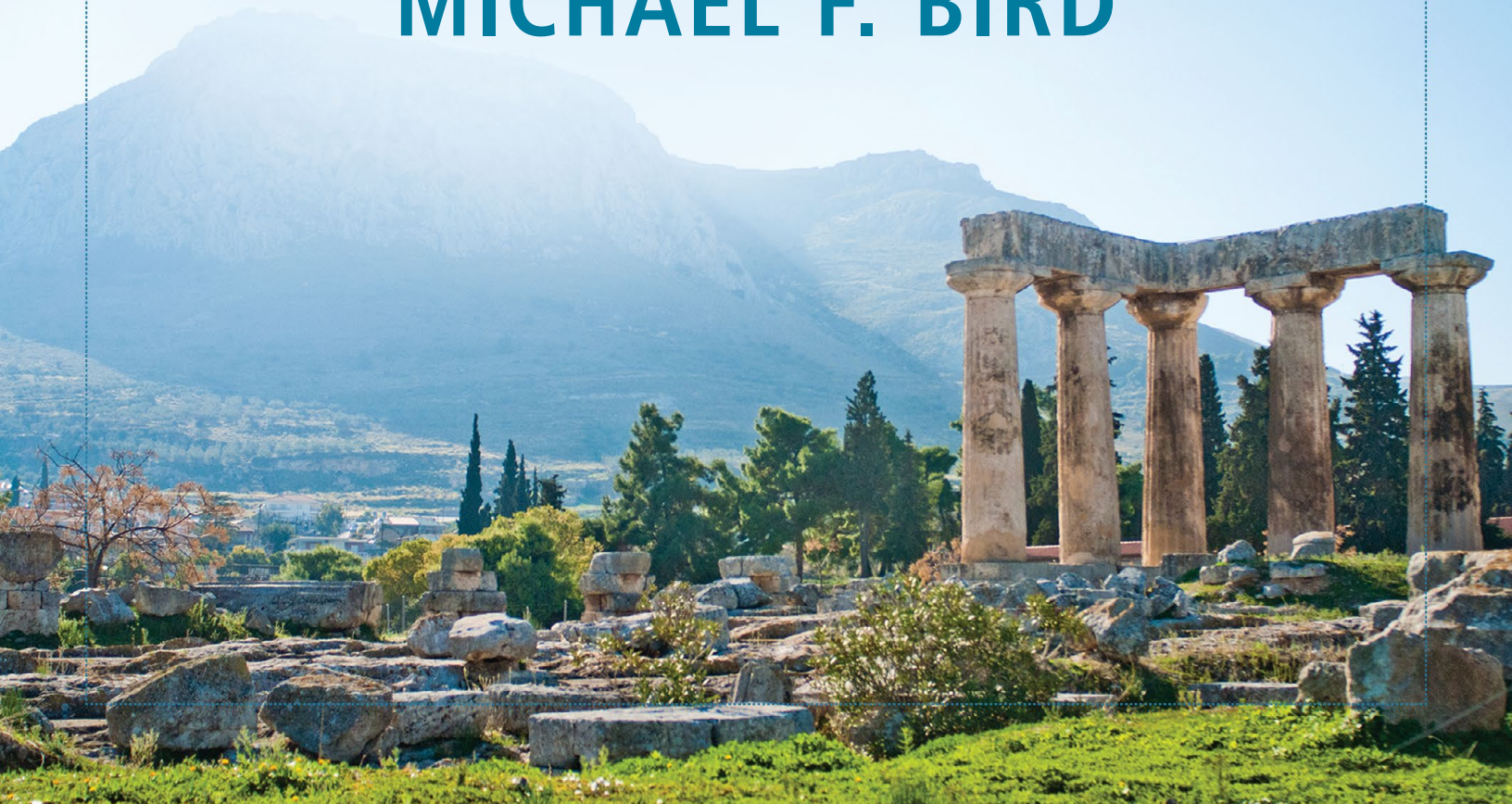

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION IS A NECESSARY PART OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

I am a big believer in reading the Bible in light of its original historical context. Knowing something about that context, whether it is the ancient Near East, the Greek conquest of Palestine and Persia, or the Roman Mediterranean, enables us to make better sense of the Bible and the things it refers to. These things can inform and enrich our Bible study, whether in finding places like "Shiloh" or "Corinth" on a map, knowing about people like "Xerxes" or "Tiberius," discovering who the "Herodians" were, or understanding the customs of the Jerusalem temple or the Ephesian temple of Artemis. The reason why study Bibles are so plentiful and sell so well is precisely because knowing these details requires some expert advice. Additionally, historical background is also important for grasping the point of our biblical texts.

I believe earnestly in a historical, even "critical" reading of the Bible. Don't be put off—when I say "critical," I do not mean criticizing the Bible or being condescending toward it. Rather, I mean reading the Bible with lots of historical questions; asking questions about why, who, when, where, and how; or else thinking about the issues that the Bible throws up at us concerning its consistency, diversity, and relevance.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND STARTER KIT

For someone wanting to get started in reading about biblical background and historical context, I'd recommend the following resources as my starter kit.

BIBLE ATLAS

For a start, read up on Palestinian geography. So, find a good Bible atlas and learn about the terrain, topographical features, and climate of places like Egypt, Syro-Palestine, Mesopotamia, Babylon, and the Mediterranean basin. This atlas should also include a map of the extent of the various empires, such as the Egyptian kingdoms and the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires. My go-to is Carl Rasmussen's *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible* (for the intimidated, there is also a student edition) and Logos Bible Software's *New Bible Atlas*.

PRIMARY SOURCES RELATED TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

When it comes to studying the Old Testament and ancient Judaism, there are some vital primary source materials you can familiarize yourself with. The problem is that since Old Testament study encompasses the entire ancient Near East, which stretches from Egypt to modern Iran, and also covers the history of the Jews under the Greek and Roman empires, there is an ocean of materials to sail around exploring. I'd begin with a survey of the history of ancient Israel, probably with Hugh Williamson's *Understanding the History of Ancient Israel*, Lester Grabbe's *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?*, and David Flusser's *Judaism of the Second Temple Period*. When it comes to some key texts and artifacts to learn about, for starts I'd recommend these:

- On creation stories, the Memphite myth, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the *Enuma Elish* will help you understand how ancient peoples from Egypt to Assyria viewed gods, creation, and humanity.
- An anthology of ancient Near Eastern myths, texts, inscriptions, hymns, songs, and letters is found in James B. Pritchard's two-volume collection *The Ancient Near East*. Specific recommendations here include Sennacherib's account of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem, the Hammurabi law code, Akkadian treaties, and letters and papyri from the Jews in Elephantine. These materials can seem very obscure and technical, so a good guide to their relevance for the Old Testament is John H. Walton's *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context*.
- The Apocrypha is a crucial collection of Jewish writings which provide a lot of information about Jewish history and practices. The collection, largely dating from between the Testaments, is something of a sequel to the Old Testament and a prequel to the New Testament. First and Second Maccabees are mandatory reading for grasping the Second Temple period and as part of the background to the New Testament. The books of Judith, Tobit, and Sirach should also be high on your reading list since they are an important window into Jewish life in Palestine and in the dispersed Jewish communities of the ancient world.
- Every reference to Jews in Greco-Roman literature is helpfully documented with commentary in Menahem Stern's *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, a real treasure of a volume.
- For those really keen, every ancient inscription mentioning the Jews, from the time of Alexander the Great to the rise of Islam, is being collated in a collection called *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae* (replacing the older collections of Jewish inscriptions made by Harry Leon and Jean-Baptiste Frey).

PRIMARY SOURCES RELATED TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

Concerning the New Testament and early Christianity, with attention paid equally to their Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, several primary sources deserve your attention.

- The Dead Sea Scrolls—several translations exist, but my favorite is by Martin Abegg, Michael Owen Wise, and Edward M. Cook. If you want to focus on some texts obviously relevant to the New Testament, I suggest 1QM (The War Scroll), 4Q531 (Messianic Apocalypse), 1QS (The Community Rule), 1QH (Thanksgiving Hymns), 11Q13 (Melchizedek Scrolls), and 1QpHab (Commentary on Habakkuk).

- Josephus, especially his *Antiquities* books 18–20, the *Jewish War* in its entirety, his biography *Life of Josephus*, plus his apologetic work *Against Apion*. I know William Whiston's translation is popular, but it is dated, arcane, and sometimes inaccurate, so stick to the Loeb edition.

- Philo of Alexandria—he has a big corpus, so I'd start with *Sacrifice of Cain and Abel*, *Migration of Abraham*, *Life of Moses*, *Embassy to Gaius*, and *Questions on Genesis and Exodus*. Again, use the Loeb edition, not Charles D. Yonge's translation.

- Pseudepigraphical texts encompassing a variety of genres such as apocalypses, testaments, rewritten scriptural history, and more, written roughly between 200 BC to AD 300, can be found in an important two-volume collection edited by James Charlesworth. The date and provenance of some of these documents is unclear, and we often don't know if a given text was composed by a Jewish or Christian author. (Christians seem to have copied and even tinkered with some of these texts.) That said, I'd probably start with *1 Enoch*, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Jubilees*, *Odes of Solomon*, and *Joseph and Aseneth*.

- Greco-Roman works—hundreds abound, so I'll be choosey. On Greek philosophy, Plato's *Republic* is good for starters. On Greek history, I'd start with Herodotus and Thucydides. On Roman emperors, it's hard to go past Suetonius's biographies in *The Twelve Caesars*. On Roman history, Tacitus's *Histories* and *Annals* of Rome is a good read. A personal favorite of mine is Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* on famous Greek and Roman figures. Finally, pretty much anything by either Cicero or Seneca is worth reading.

- The *Apostolic Fathers* is a collection of Christian writings which are the sequel to the New Testament and an important window into Christianity from the late first century to the late second century. The *Didache*, the letters of Ignatius, *1 Clement*, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and the *Epistle to Diognetus* are significant writings for the history of Christianity and the development of Christian thought. I recommend the translations by either Michael Holmes or Rick Brannan.

- Christian gospels and apocrypha, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary*, can be found in several collections. Recommended is Bart Ehrman's *The Apocryphal Gospels* and the collection of Christian apocrypha made by John H. Elliott. Make sure you read the *Gospel of Thomas*'s saying 114—it is hilarious. Oh, and don't forget to read the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* for some insights into women in the early church. This body of literature is important because you see an explosion of Christian writings in the second and third centuries, with all sorts of gospels written and gospel fragments found.

- One of the best ways to keep up with research into New Testament background is the series called *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, which draws on all sorts of materials, both archaeological and papyrological, and shows their relevance to the study of early Christianity.

BUT … HISTORICAL BACKGROUND CAN BE MISUSED

Before you plunge into the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, ancient inscriptions, or shards of Syrian pottery, some cautionary words are necessary here less we misuse biblical backgrounds in our interpretation of a biblical text. You see, as useful as background information can be for the reader, such knowledge can also be misused or misapplied. Besides that, knowledge of background does not always guarantee a better knowledge of biblical contents. Let me give you some examples of how not to use biblical backgrounds when reading the Bible.

ANALOGY DOES NOT MEAN GENEALOGY

The relevance of a particular background source and its relationship to the Bible is often disputed. Accordingly, we should not automatically assume that biblical authors were merely recycling some ancient text or tablet because they are slightly the same. Alas, similarity does not necessarily mean familiarity. Sometimes biblical authors wrote things because they were in the air, so to speak, not necessarily because the authors were slavishly copying some ancient writing.

Consider the creation stories in the book of Genesis. Scholars ask whether the creation accounts in Genesis 1–2 are dependent on ancient Near Eastern stories of creation, like the famous *Enuma Elish* (a Babylonian creation epic) or the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (a Sumerian history)? Alternatively, is Genesis an independent account of creation cut from a different cloth than these ancient Near Eastern creation stories? Or else, were the biblical authors crafting a deliberate alternative to well-known ancient views of the origins and order of the cosmos for the specific purpose of fashioning a radically different worldview and vision for human civilization? Scholars dispute the precise relevance of ancient Near Eastern creation stories and their relationship to the creation accounts in Genesis. We often do not know what texts or sources the biblical authors knew, were exposed to, were influenced by, or were responding to, and the best efforts to say otherwise are more often than not just guesswork. So, yes, knowing the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or the *Enuma Elish* makes for a good comparison with Genesis 1–2. But confidently claiming that Text A *obviously* used Text B does not actually prove the case in the absence of compelling evidence.

Let me give another example pertaining to the New Testament. When the Nag Hammadi codices were discovered in Egypt in the 1950s, this collection of Gnostic texts revolutionized the study of the New Testament. However, Gnosticism was a heresy with widespread variations, that basically pitted the god of creation, who made all the yucky matter in the world, against the God of redemption, who comes to save us from physical matter, ignorance, and even from our own bodies. Many Gnostics believed that Jesus was not Israel's Messiah, but was more like a revealer of cosmic esoterica who came to save us from the god of the Old Testament by imparting a secret knowledge of our true origins and the hope of being released from our bodies. Gnosticism is more complicated than this, but that will suffice for now. As it was, we already knew about Gnostic heresies from the church fathers in their polemical tracts, but thanks to the Nag Hammadi Codices we now have some Christian Gnostic texts talking about faith, Jesus, and salvation in their own words. As a result, some scholars began to find Gnosticism everywhere! Paul was a Gnostic, John the Evangelist was a Gnostic, Paul's opponents in Corinth and Colossae were Gnostics, and the story of the incarnation was apparently just a rip-off of some fictitious "Gnostic Redeemer Myth." The New Testament interpretation field was raining Gnostic sources and Gnostic theology all the way through the 1950s to the 1980s. That is, until folks eventually noticed that every single Gnostic source post-dated the New Testament, often by hundreds of years. Thus, the attempt to read Gnosticism back into the New Testament was basically like saying that Thomas Jefferson invented the internet. Gnosticism indeed had a big impact on the history of Christianity, especially in the second century, but efforts to read Gnosticism into the New Testament were committing the mother of all anachronisms and were therefore entirely erroneous.

ENDLESS LISTS OF PARALLEL SOURCES DOES NOT AN EXEGESIS MAKE

When I study a key word, phrase, or image in the New Testament, I am always wondering if the same word, phrase, or image appears in *1 Enoch*, the War Scroll from Qumran, an inscription in Antioch, or in Philo's biography These parallels can be very illuminating, especially if you see a widespread pattern developing. Yet there is a danger that biblical interpretation can become nothing more than an instance of what Samuel Sandmel called "parallelomania"—a lengthy listing and comparison of a biblical text with another text in order to demonstrate their supposed sameness.[1]

It is true that reading ancient literary sources and noting their parallels with biblical literature is very useful. For example, comparing Aristotle and the Dead Sea Scrolls on "righteousness" can be very illuminating for reading Paul's letter to the Romans, which talks

1 Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962): 1–13.

a lot about "righteousness" and "justification." Also, comparing the meaning of "kingdom" in apocalyptic texts like *1 Enoch* or *4 Ezra* might be insightful about what Jesus and Luke meant

by "kingdom of God." The problem is when one assumes that what Paul means in Romans is exactly the same as what Aristotle meant by "righteous" or when one takes what the Dead Sea Scrolls say about "justification" to be the same as what Paul thought. Paul might not be entirely unique in what he says about a topic—righteousness, covenant, faith, salvation, etc.—but it does not simply mean that Paul's "this" is really the same as "that" from some other text. Additionally, maybe the reason why Jesus taught so much about the kingdom of God is precisely because he had to clarify how his understanding differed from that of his contemporaries.

So, parallels are useful, but they should not be woodenly relied upon to tell you exactly what Jesus, Paul, or any of the New Testament authors meant on some given topic.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND DOES NOT GIVE US ALL THE ANSWERS

There are many instances where we wish had some kind of parallel text or an analogous bit of evidence to help us understand some disputed part of the Bible, but no such information is available.

For example, Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:1–16 forbids men from praying and prophesying *with* head coverings, and he similarly forbids women from praying and prophesying *without* a head covering. Why? Well, many explanations abound, and perhaps the best one offered by scholars who study this issue is that Paul doesn't want men praying the way pagans do, with head-coverings (you can find statues of Romans praying with head-coverings). As for women, if their heads were uncovered they were likely making statements about their independence from male authority and perhaps even suggesting their availability for questionable relationships (hence the depiction of respectable women with head-coverings in ancient art). But no one knows for certain. Plus, when Paul says that women ought to cover their heads "because of the angels" (1 Corinthians 10:10), what is that about? And don't even get me started on 1 Timothy 2:15 that "women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety." Say what? Does that mean that women are saved by having babies or that women will never die in childbirth? I can't buy either one of those options. If you read the commentaries on 1 Timothy, there are some good guesses out there on this, but I don't think anyone knows for sure. So, even with our best studies on ancient literature, art, gender norms, archaeology, and manuscripts, sometimes the best of scholars are just scratching their heads and giving us their most learned guesses.

READ HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS FREELY AND CRITICALLY

Therefore, background materials are invaluable for biblical interpretation. Seriously, we really do need historical background information to make sense of both the Old and New Testaments. That said, background texts and artifacts are not magical tools to unlock a secret biblical code; they can be wrongfully applied and the interpretation of ancient texts and materials is just as contested as biblical interpretation itself. It's good to know some historical sources, wise to use them in biblical interpretation, and wiser still not to misuse them.