

The Place of Historical Backgrounds in Biblical Interpretation

By Jason C. Meyer (Ph. D)

What follows is my attempt to answer these two questions concerning historical backgrounds: “Should we use historical backgrounds when we teach from the Bible or not? Do we really need to know extensive historical information to rightly understand a passage?”

The first question is really asking about historical backgrounds in relation to our teaching: Should we use historical backgrounds “when we teach from the Bible”? The second question asks about historical backgrounds in relation to a proper understanding of the text (“to rightly understand a passage”). These are somewhat different, yet related questions that feature different points of emphasis. I will take the second question first because how we answer it will determine how we answer the second question: *Do we really need to know extensive historical information to rightly understand a passage?*

1. Initial Answer

My answer would be “it depends.” This answer may sound like I am skirting the issue—so let me address the question in a direct fashion first. Could someone come to a correct reading of the basic meaning of a passage apart from any “extensive historical information?” Absolutely.

But this answer does not imply that historical background is thus irrelevant or unnecessary. So let me nuance my clear and bold assertion in a way that addresses the initial “it depends” part of my answer.

2. Nuanced Answer: What We Mean by Historical Backgrounds and Why We Need Them

Four points of definition and explanation seem appropriate here in order to develop a more balanced assessment of the issue. We will address what we mean by (1) “historical background,” and (2) “meaning,” and then we will consider (3) the crucial difference between God’s Word and human interpretations of it, and (4) the dangers that come from the historical distance that exists between the original readers and contemporary readers of Scripture.

First, we have to define carefully what we mean by “historical background” in order to see if we need it. Sometimes “historical background” means an understanding of the manners and customs of Bible times. For example, when the text mentions a “sandal” or a “centurion,” we would need to look up background information on what a sandal was in that day compared to our day or have some knowledge of the Roman military in order to know what constituted a “centurion” in that day.

However, historical background also includes the Old Testament background, which was likely the primary background for New Testament authors. As Gordon Fee says, the OT is “the primary story that gives meaning to the world and to their lives.”¹ Sometimes the NT writers will allude to the OT without explicitly citing it, but will expect the reader to catch the allusion. One can test an author’s intentionality at this point in a more objective way by observing the need to bring something forward from the OT text in order to understand the NT text fully. In other words, the original OT context contains the key to unlock the meaning of the NT text or else its meaning will remain concealed from the reader. We also need to stay alert to the way the OT writers use prior OT texts. Much more could be said concerning the OT background, but we hasten on to the next point.

Second, we must define what we mean by “meaning” to see if we need historical backgrounds in order to know it. On the one hand, we might say that someone can have a true knowledge of the basic meaning of a passage if they have come to understand the basic content of the passage. But knowing truly is not the same as knowing fully. A fuller knowledge of the passage would include catching more of the various shades of meaning that are genuinely there in the passage, but require a bit more digging and studying. Shades of meaning are sometimes too subtle to catch on the surface of the text.

Third, we must think about the difference between the authority of Scripture and the validity of our interpretations. Remember that the Scripture is God-breathed (inspired and inerrant), not our interpretations. How do we know that we have understood the passage (either truly or fully)? What things can come to our aid when we try to defend our interpretation when it is challenged by another interpretation? Conversely, how could we say that a certain interpretation is wrong (or at least less likely than another)? Are we ever in a position to validate or invalidate an interpretation? What are some objective criteria that we could use?

Historical background plays a part at this point. An understanding of the historical backdrop that stands behind the text lends confirmatory force to our interpretations. A reading of the text that coheres well with what we know concerning historical background should be considered a stronger or more likely reading of the text. The reverse of this principle is also true. Do our proposed interpretations create tensions with what we know of the historical backdrop of the original readers? The more tension that our interpretation creates between the text and its historical/cultural backdrop, the more likely it is that we have misread the text. We would not expect that our interpretations would involve aspects that would be foreign or unfamiliar to the original readers, unless it was clear in the text that the biblical author was challenging widely held cultural assumptions or assumptions from that historical period.

¹ Gordon Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002, p. 101.

What I am saying is that historical background is important because of the historical nature of Scripture. God chose to reveal himself to humanity at specific times and in specific ways. God's revelation was expressed in ways that the people could understand. In other words, the people that God spoke to could understand what God was saying because he spoke in the language of the people in ways and with categories that were understandable to the people.

Fourth, the historical distance between the original readers and contemporary readers necessitates an awareness of two factors for interpretation.

1. We must remember that much of the language and the categories that were so familiar to people back then are foreign to us today. The biblical text sometimes will give explanations to help the reader (e.g., Mark 7:3–4). However, the biblical text itself often does not include everything that we need to bridge that historical and cultural gap. One of the most obvious examples here is language. The New Testament was written in Greek, but it does not include a Greek grammar that can help teach non-Greek readers to read it! Other barriers exist in other areas of communication. There are a whole host of shared cultural and historical assumptions that the biblical authors and their audiences shared in common that are not directly expressed in the text itself.

This lack is not surprising given the nature of communication. We often communicate to one another on the basis of shared assumptions that are not explicitly expressed every time we talk. These assumptions could include a shared history, shared social structures, shared language, or shared culture. The problem is that sometimes we do not know or share these same historical, social, or cultural assumptions with the authors or the first hearers of Scripture.

2. Just like there were things that were familiar to the authors and original audiences that are now foreign to us, there are also things that are familiar to us that would be foreign to them! Gordon Fee captures both of these factors when he says: "Contemporary readers share very few of these assumptions, but at the same time we bring to the text another whole set of shared assumptions within our own culture(s)."² There is a danger here of eisegesis: instead of drawing out of Scripture what is really there (i.e., exegesis), we can read our own cultural, societal, and personal assumptions into Scripture (i.e., eisegesis). These dangers force us to address the use and abuse of historical backgrounds, which we will consider in the next section.

3. The Use and Abuse of Historical Backgrounds and the Hard Questions That Should Govern How They Are Used

We should acknowledge that the use of historical background is a contentious issue today because it has been abused. Sometimes people stress the historical context

² Ibid, 96.

more than the context of the passage itself. In other words, historical background (either assumed or documented) can force the text to say what it does not appear to be saying. I would put some of the egalitarian re-readings of 1 Timothy 2:12 in this category. The Apostle Paul appears to be saying that he does not allow a woman to teach or have authority over a man. Some egalitarians appeal to historical backgrounds in order to say that this text does not forbid women from teaching and exercising authority over men today.

Please note that I think this is a misuse of historical backgrounds in biblical interpretation. There is a major difference between this use of historical background and the one which I am advocating. I think historical backgrounds should be used to illumine and thus confirm the clear meaning of the text. It does not run roughshod over the details of the text. Rather, it should illumine and confirm our interpretations of texts precisely by showing how it makes the most sense of all of the details of the text.

It is precisely at this point that our own cultural and societal assumptions become a hindrance to interpretation. We can want the text to say something other than what it says and we can appeal to historical backgrounds or historical reconstructions in order to avoid the normative nature of the text for today. Some egalitarians use their societal setting as a trump card over the text and simply say that Paul was wrong. Others say Paul was right to say what he said because of certain factors he faced in his first-century context, but those same factors from the historical background would make it wrong for us to apply it in the same way today because we don't face those same problems. In other words, they claim that Paul words are historically conditioned to such an extent that they apply only to his first-century setting, not to our twenty-first century setting. This interpretation does not use historical background to confirm the clear details of the text; it causes a contradiction between what the text meant and what we say the text means today.

We should be quick to add that egalitarians are not the only Christians that read things into texts that are not there. We all face this danger to one degree or another. An awareness of this tendency forces us to ask difficult questions that can govern our use of historical backgrounds.

- How clear is our grasp of the proposed historical background? Much of our knowledge of historical background is circumstantial and fragmentary in nature. As Gordon Fee says, "much of our information is pieced together from a variety of extant sources that reflect but a small percentage of what was written in antiquity."³
- Is the proposed background a unified assumption of antiquity or is their considerable diversity? Sometimes the proposed background was the subject

³ Ibid, 111.

of much debate in the ancient world. The whole debate over the New Perspective on Paul has given rise to the acknowledgement that first-century Judaism was sufficiently variegated to the point that one cannot simply claim “Jews of Paul’s day said ...” without some serious qualifications.

- Furthermore, we must reflect more fully upon what we mean by saying that something is a background to something else. Are we claiming that a biblical author directly borrowed from something, was influenced by something, or simply said something that was common language? If we say that something is parallel to something else, we have to first ask, “what constitutes a true parallel?”

In other words, historical background can be over-used to the extent that it is abused. Historical background must remain secondary in authority to the primary authority of Scripture itself. When we say “context is king,” we must distinguish between appeals to the secondary authority of the “historical” context and appeals to the primary authority of the text’s own context. These dangers could cause one to want to run and hide from all use of historical backgrounds. There are reasons to be cautious—but there are also reasons to rejoice.

4. Reasons to Rejoice

Biblical interpreters should be thankful for a knowledge of historical backgrounds, not fearful of them. The historical nature of Scripture necessitates an approach to the interpretation of Scripture that is historical in nature. Therefore, it is right to pause for a moment and thank God for the way that he revealed himself to us. Think about it: He did not reveal himself in ethereal or vague spiritual or philosophical language that fails to correspond to real life experience. Now that would make Scripture difficult to understand! The way God revealed himself to us is a cause for rejoicing for two reasons.

First, ethereal or surreal spiritual or philosophical reflections are difficult to pin down with any certainty because they do not correspond to any real-life or real-time experiential categories to which anyone could relate. If Scripture is not historical in nature, then people that first received God’s revelation probably did not have the right categories to understand it with any sense of certainty and that same lack of confidence would plague us even more the further removed we are from when it was revealed.

Second, the historical nature of Scripture reminds us of the historical nature of our faith. If Christ did not really rise from the dead in a real historical sense, then we have no basis for our faith (1 Corinthians 15:14), we are still in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:17), and we would have no hope for any life to come and thus should be pitied (1 Corinthians 15:19). This historical dimension is a reason for trusting the reliability of Scripture, especially regarding the coming of Christ. The Creator God wrote himself into the story of human history in the person of his Son.

God's revelation of truth is grounded in history because the coming of the Son (who is the way, the truth, and the life) is grounded in history. We move now to consider the question that gave rise to all of these reflections!

5. The Use of Historical Backgrounds in Our Teaching

We are now in a position to answer the first part of the original two-part question. We can also answer it much more succinctly. (You will probably agree that this too is a cause for rejoicing!)

Should we use historical backgrounds when we teach from the Bible or no? You may have guessed already what my answer will be. If you chose, "it depends," then you are on the right track. It really depends upon our assessment of the needs of our hearers. In some ways, good teaching is teaching that does good to the people we are teaching. We must consider their needs. What would build them up and give grace according to the needs of the moment?

In a context where one perceives that certain historical dimensions of the faith are under fire, it may be appropriate to ground your interpretations in their historical context. Or perhaps one's interpretation could be perceived as controversial and needs to be defended in more detail. In those cases, more historical background may be appropriate.

One caution is in order here as well. Do not become overly specific in your assessment of people's needs. Do not assume that historical backgrounds should be used only when we perceive that something is under fire. Do not forget that people have a deep-seated, more general need to feel that Scripture is full of real life drama and real life people. The Bible can take on an aura that makes it less than approachable. People begin to have a hard time relating to what it says when they don't think that it reflects real life. Sketching the historical backdrop can cause Scripture to come alive in a way that causes people to see that these events recorded in Scripture really happened. God really did speak. Jesus really did come. He really did change the lives of those living in the real world! Sometimes these things need to be celebrated and not just defended.

One more caution is probably necessary: Do not overdo it! The amount of historical background that people need will vary considerably depending upon the circumstances. For example, one can speak of the resurrection from different angles depending on whether it is a small group of sincere believers or a larger gathering of unbelievers that scoff at the resurrection as a fairy tale or a fable.

6. Affirming and Celebrating the Clarity of Scripture Rightly Understood

It is always helpful to take a step back after attempting to answer a question by clarifying what you are not saying. I am not saying that someone should be plagued with uncertainty when they read their Bible unless they have an extensive

knowledge of historical backgrounds. I want to affirm strongly that some things are clear even apart from a detailed knowledge of historical and cultural backgrounds.

In other words, I am a firm proponent of the doctrine of the clarity (sometimes called “perspicuity”) of Scripture. We should note carefully that the doctrine of Scripture’s clarity has primary reference to Scripture’s teaching on matters necessary for salvation. People can read God’s Word and understand the way of salvation without seminary training! One should note, however, that the clarity of Scripture does not teach that all Scripture is equally clear. How could the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture say this and remain faithful to Scripture? Scripture itself says that some things are difficult to understand (2 Peter 3:16). I have had that feeling at many different points in interpreting Scripture and so it is something of a comfort to me that other biblical authors have had the same thoughts.

7. Greg Beale’s Balanced Use of Historical Backgrounds

I conclude with a quotation from Greg Beale that I believe captures the right sense of balance on this point. He has used historical backgrounds in extensive ways as a seasoned scholar and I am happy to commend what I regard as his seasoned assessment on the role of historical background.

“Our study of ancient materials outside the Bible to gain a better understanding of the temple does not mean that this material is equal in authority to the Bible. Rather, it indicates that the Bible was written *in very specific historical circumstances* and the better one understands these surrounding circumstances, the more rich one’s understanding of the Bible may become.”⁴

Beale compares our use of contemporary (non-inspired) study helps like commentaries to the use of ancient (non-inspired) study tools.

“Christians often use commentaries on the Bible in order to understand the biblical text better. Sometimes such commentaries provide a perspective on a text, which sheds new light and helps us to understand the text better. The new perspective is validated over other previous ones *because it makes more sense of the details of the text*. Sometimes, however, these commentaries are clearly wrong and are not helpful, and, at other times, these commentaries merely summarize the biblical text, saying nothing new nor wrong.

“The documents of the Ancient Near East and of Judaism function comparably to modern commentaries. Should we not also make use of this ancient commentary material, for example early Jewish interpretations of Old Testament texts, themes, and so on? Such Jewish commentary material has the same potential use (and misuse) as do contemporary commentaries, though they have the potential of

⁴ Greg Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*. IVP, 2004, p. 31, my emphasis.

picking up early oral interpretive tradition that may stem from Old Testament times itself.”⁵

⁵ Ibid, my emphasis.