

Lesson 6 - The Historical / Cultural context



What is Historical / Cultural Context?



Historical / Cultural Context refers to what the world was like in the time and place that the original text was written.





**Culture,
Language,
Situation,
Covenant, Time**



**Why Bother
with Historical
& cultural
context?**

Consistency!



Why Bother with Historical / Cultural Context?

- It offers us a view of what God was saying to the original audience.**
- It helps us see how they would have understood God's message.**
- The way we approach the Bible should match how God gave us the Bible.**

Interpretive principle:

**If our interpretation
would not have made
sense back then,
we are probably on
the wrong track.**

What is included in Historical / Cultural Context:



The Biblical Writer:

- Where did he come from?**

Example: Paul

He was a persecutor of the church. He did horrible things to Christians. Understanding this helps us understand why he called himself “The worst of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15-16).

The Biblical Writer:

- **Where did he come from?**
- **When did he write?**

The date of the writing helps us understand:

- If the political climate of the time affected the writing.**
- If there were writing styles that were popular at that time.**
- Etc...**

The Biblical Writer:

- **Where did he come from?**
- **When did he write?**
- **What kind of ministry did he have?**

Example: Hosea

He married Gomer, a woman who was not faithful to him.

God used this heartbreaking situation in the prophet's life to illustrate the pain that God felt when Israel went into idolatry (cf. Hosea 3:1-5, 4:1-3).

The Biblical Writer:

- **Where did he come from?**
- **When did he write?**
- **What kind of ministry did he have?**
- **What was his relationship with his audience?**

Example: Paul

Paul's tone to the Galatians (who were abandoning the true gospel for a fake one, Gal. 1:6-10)

is drastically different from his tone to the Thessalonians

(who he commends for their faithfulness through persecution, 1 Thess. 1:1-10)

Example: Jonah

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, which at the time were some of the worst enemies of the Jews. Jonah actively hated the people God sent him to preach to.

The Biblical Writer:

- **Where did he come from?**
- **When did he write?**
- **What kind of ministry did he have?**
- **What was his relationship with his audience?**
- **Why was he writing?**

The Biblical Audience:

- **Who they were**

Who they were:

This is often directly stated.

**Luke addresses his Gospel and
the book of Acts to
“Theophilus.”**

**Most of Paul’s writings were
clearly addressed.**

Who they were:

Some books do not explicitly state who the audience is.

In these cases, you must examine the text to try and discover who the original audience was.

If that fails, then extra Biblical sources are necessary.

The Biblical Audience:

- **Who they were**
- **What their circumstances were**

Example: Jeremiah

The people were already experiencing God's punishment for their sins, yet he writes about hope. Their circumstances would affect how they received that message, and it effects our interpretation of the same message.

The Biblical Audience:

- **Who they were**
- **What their circumstances were**
- **What situations they were facing**

Example: The Epistles

The Epistles are situational, meaning that they were written because of a specific situation in one of the congregations that needed to be addressed by an inspired writer.

Example:

Colossians was written to fight false teaching that was going on (Col. 2:4-5, 8, 16-23).

Telling them to put their whole faith and trust in Christ (Col. 1:15-20; 2:9-15).

Other Historical / cultural elements to consider:

- Geography**

Example:

Jesus starts His parable about the good Samaritan by saying

“a man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho.”

There is about a 2,500 ft elevation drop from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Other Historical / cultural elements to consider:

- Geography**
- Social and religious customs**

Example:

In the the parable of the prodigal son, the father ran to meet his adult son who had returned.

In their culture an older man was seen as being to dignified to run, so the fact that he did run tells us something very important about how God feels about a prodigal.

Other Historical / cultural elements to consider:

- Geography**
- Social and religious customs**
- Economic issues**

Example:

In Acts 16 Paul and Silas cast a demon out of a slave girl who had been earning money for her owner by telling the future. Her owner was angered by this and complained to the magistrates. His complaint had nothing to do with the gospel, and everything to do with a loss of income.

Other Historical / cultural elements to consider:

- Geography**
- Social and religious customs**
- Economic issues**
- Political issues**

Example:

Again, in Acts 16 Paul and Silas were beaten without a trial before being put into prison. They were both Roman citizens and it was illegal to beat a Roman citizen without trial. The soldiers and city officials could face severe penalties for doing so (Acts 16:36-40).

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Discovering the Historical and Cultural context in the Biblical Text



Dangers Associated With Studying Background:

- 1. Inaccurate background information.**

Inaccurate background information:

Your information is only as good as your resource. This is why we are going to the Bible first before looking at other resources.

Sources to avoid:

- **Hearsay**
- **Info that cannot be crosschecked with other resources**
- **Sources with a low scholarly standard**

Example:

“It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle...”

(Mat. 19:23-24)

Some sources have claimed this referred to a gate in Jerusalem or a mountain pass close to Jerusalem.

However, there is no evidence to support these claims.

Example:

“It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle...”

(Mat. 19:23-24)

The answer is found in verse 26.

“With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Dangers Associated With Studying Background:

- 1. Inaccurate background information.**
- 2. Elevating the background info above the text**

Elevating the background info above the text:

**This takes the form of using
outside resources (such as
commentaries or google) to
circumvent actual in-depth
study of the Bible.**

Example:

A young preacher asked a couple of older preachers, “What does Paul mean in this passages?”

The first responded, “Brother *so-and-so* says that it means *thus-and-such*.”

The second said, “study the rest of what Paul wrote there, the text will explain the meaning itself.”

**What is the best source for
discovering the historical
and cultural context?**

The Bible itself!



Recorded History:

- **Old Testament books of history**
- **The Gospels**
- **The Book of Acts**



How do we do this in a practical sense?

Get a pen and paper or your computer and take notes of historically and culturally important facts.



Make note of:

- **Locations**

Locations:

- Location of recipients**
- Location of writer**
- Location of congregations**
- Locations of events**
- Other locations mentioned**

To find the locations of the writer and recipients, look in the introduction and conclusion of the book.

Examples:

1 Peter

Revelation

1 Timothy

To find other locations you will simply have to read through the book and take notes.

**Example:
Acts 21:1-14**

Make note of:

- **Locations**
- **Specific historical events**

Specific historical events help us date the writing as well as helping us understand the things written.

**Example:
Acts 21:31-40**

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2023**

Make note of:

- **Locations**
- **Specific historical events**
- **Names**

Recurring names help us link events between books and learn from individual's lives.

Example:

**Acts 18:2, 18, 26, Romans 16:3,
1 Corinthians 16:19, 2 Timothy 4:19**

**Names of important figures
help us date and verify the
Bible.**

**Example:
Isaiah 6:1,
Acts 13:6-8,
Acts 18:12-17**

Make note of:

- **Locations**
- **Specific historical events**
- **Names**
- **Culturally specific facts**

Culturally specific facts:

- Groups (religious, political or social)**
- Occupations**
- Living conditions**
- Other facts that impacted daily life.**

**Identifying groups help us
understand their bias.**

Examples:

**John 4:1-9, 2 Kings 17:24-41,
Ezra 4:1-4**

Acts 17:16-21

**Identifying occupations helps
understand people's mindsets
and daily life.**

Examples:

Amos 7:12-15

Acts 18:1-3,

Acts 19:23-29

**Understanding the recipients
living conditions helps us
understand how they would
receive the writing.**

Examples:

Deuteronomy 6:10-15

Ezekiel 1:1-3,

Haggai 1:1-5,

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Make note of:

- **Locations**
- **Specific historical events**
- **Names**
- **Culturally specific facts**
- **Purpose Statements**

An author will often address issues linked to the cultural and historical context in their purpose statements.

Examples:

1 Corinthians 7:1, 25, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1

Revelation 2-3

Extrabiblical tools for studying the cultural and historical context



Dangers Associated With Studying Background:

- 1. Inaccurate background information.**
- 2. Elevating the background info above the text**

Remember:

Your information is only as good as your resource, this is why we should go to the Bible first.

Resources for studying the cultural context of an entire book:

- **Bible handbooks**
- **Old and New Testament Introductions and Surveys**
- **Commentaries**

Bible Handbooks:

- Generally basic and brief**
- Include general background introductory information.**
- Will often contain short articles on subjects of interest.**
- Might contain basic commentary.**

Example:

**Titus and Revelation in a couple
Bible handbooks.**

Old and New Testament Introductions and Surveys

- Detailed background information**
- Overviews the contents of each book**
- Info on textual criticism, proofs of authorship, controversies and more.**

Introductions generally offer more technical discussions of the background and spend less time on the content of the book.

Surveys generally spend less time on background information and focus more on the content.

Example:

**Ezekiel in Old Testament
Introduction and Survey.**

Commentaries:

- Generally, more detailed than the previously mentioned resources.**
- Prone to include personal bias**
- Can be good for learning about different points of view.**
- We must be careful not to elevate them above the text!**

Example:

**Truth for Today Commentary on
Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon
by Denny Petrillo.**

Resources for studying the cultural context of a passage:

- Bible Atlases**
- Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias**
- Special studies in ancient life and culture.**
- Commentaries**
- Digital resources.**

Bible Atlases:

- Maps from different time periods**
- Delineations of political power**
- Locations where important events happened**
- Paths of important journeys**
- Diagrams of important structures**

Example:

The changing political powers through history.

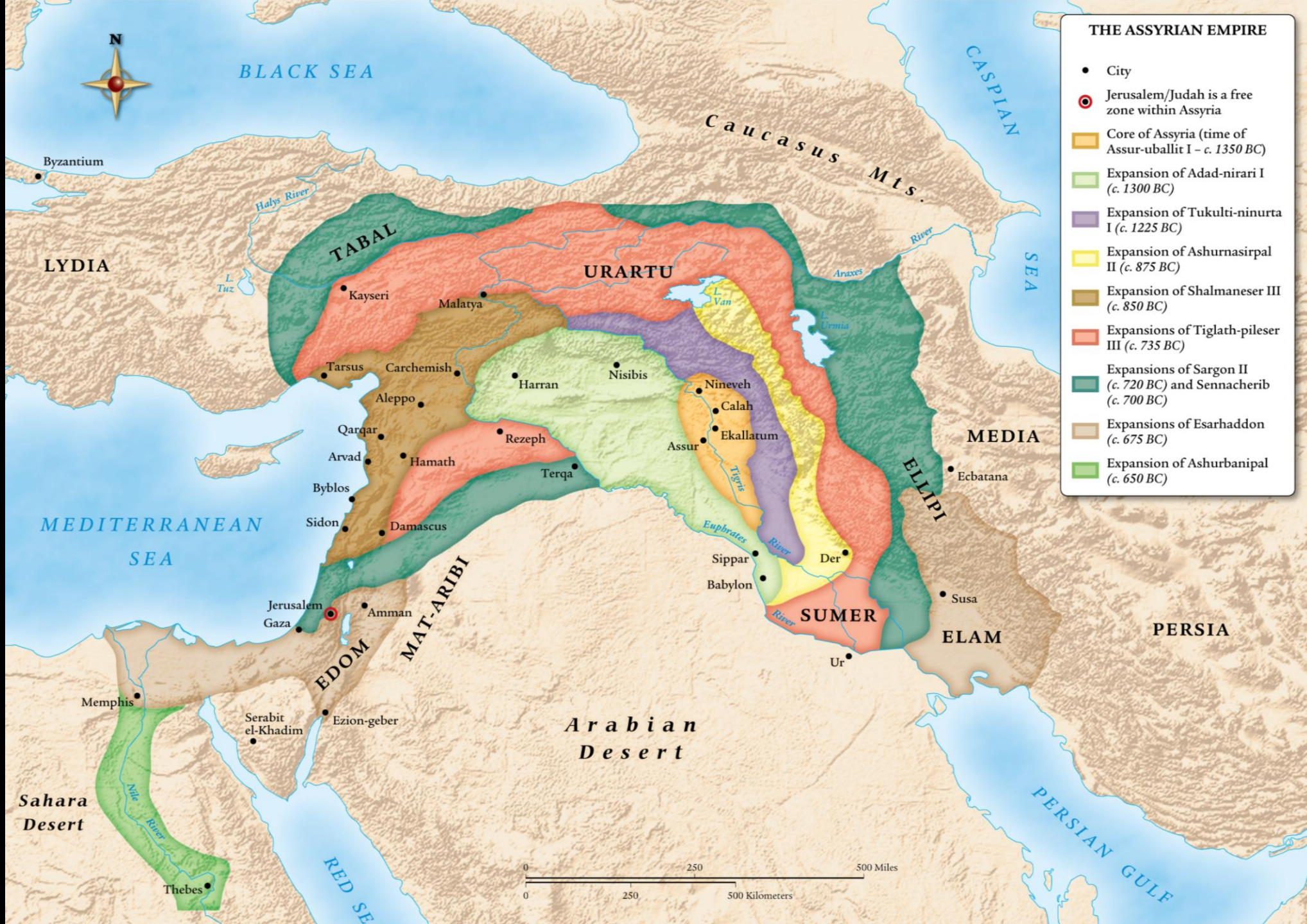
NATIONS OF GENESIS 10

- Descendants of Japheth (*Gen. 10:1-5*)
- Descendants of Ham (*Gen. 10:6-20*)
- Descendants of Shem (*Gen. 10:21-31*)



CANAANITES

- ARVADITES
- ZEMARITES
- ARKITES
- SINITES
- SIDONIANS
- AMORITES
- PERIZZITES
- HITTITES
- HIVITES
- JEBUSITES
- GIRGASHITES



BLACK SEA

CASPIAN SEA

Caucasus Mts.

LYDIA

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

MEDIA

ELLIPi

ELAM

PERSIA

Arabian Desert

Sahara Desert

RED SEA

PERSIAN GULF

Byzantium

TABAL

URARTU

SUMER

Halys River
L. Tuz

Anaxes River
L. Van
Urmia

Euphrates River
Tigris River

EDOM
MAT-ARIBI

Jerusalem
Gaza

Amman

Memphis

Serabit el-Khadim

Ezion-geber

Thebes

Kayseri

Malatya

Tarsus

Carchemish

Harran

Nisibis

Nineveh

Calah

Assur

Ekallatum

Aleppo

Rezeph

Terqa

Qarqar

Arvad

Hamath

Byblos

Sidon

Sippar

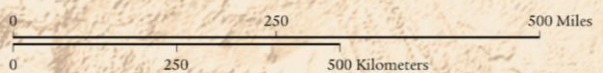
Babylon

Der

Susa

Ur

Ecbatana





THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

- City
- Perimeter boundary of the Persian Empire
- Persian Royal Road
- Heartland of Persia/Persis (when Cyrus ascended the throne)
- Territories gained by Cyrus (550 BC)
- Territories gained by Cyrus (547 BC)
- Territories gained by Cyrus (539 BC)
- Territories gained by Cambyses II
- Territories temporarily gained by Xerxes I



THE GREEK EMPIRE (ALEXANDER AND POST-ALEXANDER)

- City
 - ⊙ Siege
 - Persian Royal Road
 - Alexander Empire boundary
 - ← Alexander route from Pella
 - ← Alexander route from Memphis
 - ← Alexander route from Babylon
 - ← Alexander route to Babylon
 - ★ Battle
- | Post Alexander | |
|----------------|---------------------|
| | Hellenistic kingdom |
| | Seleucid kingdom |
| | Ptolemaic kingdom |
| | Antigonid kingdom |



Battle of Granicus River

Alexander decisively defeats Darius III (331 B.C.)

Alexander wins major victory over Darius III (333 B.C.)

Sahara Desert

Arabian Desert

Hindu Kush Mts.

Indus Valley

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

- City
- Perimeter boundary of Roman Empire
- Roman territory by the time of Julius Caesar (d. 44 BC)
- Roman territory by the time of Augustus Caesar (d. AD 14)
- Roman territory by the time of Trajan (d. AD 117)
- Territory temporarily controlled by Rome
- - - East-West division of the Roman Empire (AD 395)



Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias:

- Provide information about specific topics arranged alphabetically.**
- Are great when you need specific information without wading through everything the other resources offer.**

Special studies in ancient life and culture:

- Provide detailed discussions on selected topics.**
- Can be helpful when you want to dig deep into a specific topic.**

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Resources for studying the cultural context of a passage:

- **Bible Atlases**
- **Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias**
- **Special studies in ancient life and culture.**
- **Commentaries**
- **Digital resources.**

Digital Resources:

- Most of the resources mentioned are available in digital form.**
- Digital format provides easy portability for on-the-go study.**
- Can be harder to manage if you are writing notes and looking up info on the same mobile device.**

Digital Resources:

- **Logos Bible Software**
- **E-sword.net**
- **blueletterbible.org**
- **biblegateway.com**

Exercise:

**Find out what the different
resources say about**

Aquila and Prisca

1 Corinthians 16:19

