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Exploring the Historical Setting

BACKGROUND FROM THE AUTHOR

In this session we shall be concentrating on one of those strategies that might seem strange to persons not used to historical-critical study of the Bible. Yet it is one that is especially important for us to understand if our overall study is to engage them successfully.

We begin by introducing the notion of creating distance between ourselves and the biblical text. By that we mean pushing the Bible back into the distant past, into the historical setting out of which it came, in order to understand as best we can how it might have been received by those for whom it was first written. We cannot do this perfectly or completely. Our evidence is too sketchy. Moreover, through the centuries knowledge of the original setting of some biblical texts has been lost. Yet we can still re-create the historical setting for most biblical texts and it is important that we do so.

Obviously this is not a strategy that most churchgoers are used to seeing. So it might be a good idea for the leader to make time in the session to ensure that all participants understand the rationale for what we are doing. Bible studies all over the country usually **begin and end** with the modern concern for “what the Bible means to me.” The reason for this is both clear and laudable: we want to hear God speaking to us now, in the present moment. We acknowledged exactly that concern as being of first importance in the previous session.

Yet very few of us realize the degree to which thinking first and only about what the Bible means now allows us to import our own cultural and historical perceptions into the Bible. Scholars often call this unfortunate tendency “eisegesis”—reading into a biblical text what is not really there. It is something to which we are all prone, scholar, preacher and layperson alike. We think we are reading the Bible when in fact we are looking in a mirror.

It is absolutely true that the historical setting of a text can have a significant impact on its meaning. In this unit we use examples that will demonstrate this for the participants. But

as the leader you may be able to think of additional examples from Scripture. It may also be possible to think of examples from contemporary experience. If one read President Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous line, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," but did not know that it was delivered just after the attack on Pearl Harbor, it simply would not have the same kind of meaning. In the same way, one needs to understand the historical setting and circumstances of Martin Luther King's famous "I have a Dream" speech. Without awareness of the civil rights movement and the tensions in our society at that time, the speech simply would not carry the same intense emotional quality it now has for most Americans.

In other words, historical setting matters. Thus, the strategy we are using in this session, what we call "creating distance," is an attempt to understand the way historical setting affects the meaning of biblical texts. But it will be important for the leader to clarify the reason for worrying about historical context, so that participants do not get the impression we are simply trying to make historians out of them. We are moving Scripture away from ourselves, back into its original setting, as best we can in order to hear it more authentically. In a nutshell, we are trying to be responsible hearers of the word.

That is the rationale every participant needs to understand clearly for this study to proceed. It is only when we have heard the text on its own terms that we can begin to ask in a responsible way what it can say to us now. Obviously what the Bible says now matters. That is what makes the text theological rather than merely historical. But responsible Bible study cannot **begin and end** with the modern end of the conversation lest we hear only our own voices articulating congenial messages of our own creation.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Identify the historical setting in which the creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:4a became part of Israel's tradition.
2. Indicate how an awareness of this context provides a new understanding of the meaning of the story for today.
3. Describe how placing the Book of Ruth in the period after Israel returned from exile offers fresh insight into the message of the book.
4. Use resources for study such as Bible dictionaries and commentaries to gather information about the historical setting and purpose of the Gospel of Mark.

Resources You May Need

- Pictures and posters of creation
- A chalkboard and chalk; newsprint, markers, and masking tape
- Your summary of the learning objectives for the session or an outline of the topics and issues you will be introducing
- A DVD player, a monitor, and the disk with Dr. Rohrbaugh's comments for this session
- A film clip from *Inherit the Wind*
- Copies of Resource 3A
- Copies of Resource 3B
- A large copy of the "Worldview Chart"
- Copies of the assignments for the four sections studying Ruth, along with newsprint and markers
- Copies of the four questions for the study of Mark
- Introductions to the New Testament, Bible dictionaries, and commentaries, or copies of the introduction to Mark in a study Bible or Bible dictionary
- Chart of the four *Working Assumptions* of this study

Session Overview

SETTING THE STAGE

1. **Gratitude for Creation.** Before the session begins place around the room posters and pictures that portray the majesty of creation. As members of the group gather, invite them to view the display. Ask them to share any insights or comments they care to make about the pictures.

When it is time to begin the study, introduce the person who agreed at the last session to lead in prayer or a devotional activity. Or, lead in prayer yourself, using a prayer of thanksgiving for creation such as this one adapted from *The Book of Common Prayer*:

Almighty God, we thank you for the glory of creation. Your word caused the water to be brimming with all kinds of living creatures and the air to be filled with all sorts of birds. We rejoice in the richness of your handiwork and pray for your wisdom for all who live on this earth, that we may wisely manage and not destroy what you have made for us and for our descendants. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

- 2. Your Plan for this Session.** Briefly describe your plan for the session in your own words. Then list on a chalkboard or newsprint your summary of the learning objectives for the session or an outline of the topics and issues you will be introducing. Invite comments and questions about the plan.

Prepare the members of the group to watch the DVD with Dr. Rohrbaugh's comments for the session by asking them to listen carefully to what he says about the need to create distance between ourselves and the biblical text. Play the recording. At its conclusion, lead the group in a brief discussion about what Dr. Rohrbaugh means by this statement. Ask participants to comment on how the usual procedure of beginning the study of a biblical passage with the question "What does this text mean to me?" may reduce this distance. Take notes on this discussion to use in the *Closing* segment of the session.

Invite the group to share questions that arose as they prepared for this session. Record these on newsprint or a chalkboard. Respond to any that can be answered quickly. If you began a Loose Ends list of questions at a previous session, decide whether to address some of the questions on that list during this session.

INTRODUCING THE STRATEGY

- 1. Misreading Biblical Stories.** Summarize Dr. Rohrbaugh's comments on page 20 of the *Resource Book* about how we misread the story in Luke 2 in which Joseph and Mary can find no room at the "inn" in Bethlehem. Point out that this is an instance of our reading the New Testament from a twenty-first-century North American perspective.

and/or

Another biblical story we often misread is the story of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:4a. This story has been at the center of the debate about the relationship of science and religion. Dr. Rohrbaugh believes that those engaged in this debate often ignore the historical context of the story and as a result miss the point of the narrative.

Show the film clip from *Inherit the Wind* that you selected for this session. Following the film, invite brief comments about the way in which the central religious issues in the film are presented. To what extent is the historical context of the creation story in Genesis acknowledged?

- 2. Retelling the Creation Story.** Invite members of the group to retell the creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:4a using a "popcorn" style in which they quickly name different segments of the narrative. Record their offerings on a chalkboard or newsprint and encourage members of the group to correct one another until they have pieced together the main points of the story.

Then summarize Dr. Rohrbaugh's comments about the story on pages 21 and 22 in the *Resource Book*, noting his remarks about stylized language and the repetition of phrases such as, "And God said . . . and it was so," or "And God saw that it was good . . . and there was evening and there was morning . . ." Dr. Rohrbaugh suggests that this is liturgical language, the language of prayer. He calls the text a "creation hymn." It addresses a theological issue and not the scientific concern with how the world got here and how long it took to appear.

and/or

Distribute copies of Resource 3A and invite participants to work individually as they respond to the assignment on the sheet, using information from the creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:4a. After about ten minutes, gather the group together and compare their responses. Call attention to the orderly form and rhythm in the story.

- 3. Life in Babylon.** Give a four- to five-minute minilecture summarizing the information Dr. Rohrbaugh provides on pages 22 to 26 of the *Resource Book* about the historical and cultural setting of the composition of the creation story. Highlight the plight of the people of Israel in Babylon during the sixth century by reading Psalm 137:1-6. It would be difficult for the Israelites to practice their religion in a foreign culture and with no temple. The creation story in Genesis 1 was a response to the threat to their faith posed by their exile in a polytheistic nation.

You will find additional information for this presentation in several of the books listed in Appendix 2 of the *Resource Book*. Check the indexes for such topics as Genesis 1, creation, the Yahwist Epic, the Enuma Elish. It will be helpful to the group if you post on a chalkboard or newsprint a list of key words you use in your presentation, such as Exile (Babylonian Captivity), Nebuchadnezzar, Marduk, Tiamat, Kingu, Ziggurat.

Then invite group members to join in a discussion of this material, using questions such as the following:

- *What information about the historical setting of Genesis 1 was new to you?*
- *Did you find the information helpful or confusing in seeking to understand the meaning of the story? In what way?*
- *Would you now be more or less likely to agree with Dr. Rohrbaugh's interpretation of the story? Why?*

and/or

Distribute copies of the "Worldview Chart" on Resource 3B. Divide the group into five sections and ask each section to fill in one of the rows in the chart. For example, Section One will fill in information about the worldview of Israel, Babylon, and Our Country concerning Creator/Deities. Section Two will do the same for the issue of Creation/Nature. The information for Israel and Babylon can be found on pages

24 to 27 in the *Resource Book*. Participants can rely on their own insights to fill in the Our Country sections.

After twelve to fifteen minutes, call the sections together to share the information they have gathered. Place this information on a large version of the “Worldview Chart” you prepared beforehand on newsprint or a chalkboard. Invite participants to share insights and comments about what they have learned about the creation story in this activity.

and

The purpose of our study is not just to accumulate information about the historical setting of biblical passages, but also to nurture a vital faith. To encourage further reflection about the meaning of the creation story in Genesis 1, place on a chalkboard or newsprint the chart below:

**What was the religious
and political situation
THEN?**

**What is the religious
and political situation
NOW?**

**What was the theological
meaning of the story
THEN?**

**What is the theological
meaning of the story
NOW?**

Allow a few moments for participants to ponder the chart. Then use questions such as these to lead a discussion:

- *In what ways are the religious situations in the time of Babylon and today similar? Different?*
- *What was the meaning of the creation story for the Jews in Babylon in the sixth century BCE?*
- *What does the story say to our situation today? What cultural idols or issues currently threaten faith? (You may want to review Dr. Rohrbaugh’s comments on several of these issues on pages 26 and 27 of the Resource Book.)*

PRACTICING THE STRATEGY

Dr. Rohrbaugh has included two activities in this section of the *Resource Book*. The first activity, a study of Ruth, illustrates how the Bible itself is an important resource for “Exploring the Historical Setting” of a text. The second activity, which is focused on the Gospel of Mark, involves the use of secondary resources. Below you will find suggestions for using both of these activities in this group session. If that will not be possible, it will be best to include the activity on Ruth. Participants can then work on the other activity independently and bring the results of their research on Mark to the next meeting, where it will be included in the segment on *Practicing the Strategy*.

1. **Getting to Know Ruth.** Divide the group into four sections. The assignments for the four sections are listed below. The groups may present their reports in pictorial form if they wish. Provide copies of the assignments for the groups, along with newsprint and markers.

Section One:

Read the introduction to Ruth in a study Bible or Bible Dictionary. Prepare a brief summary of the date of composition and the themes and purpose of the book.

Section Two:

Read Ezra 1, and 6:20-22. Prepare a summary of these materials that includes Cyrus' decision to allow the Jews to return to their homeland and the joy of the people over renewed worship in their Temple.

Section Three:

Read Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 13:1-3, 23-27. Prepare a summary of the marriage policies of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Section Four:

Read Ruth 4:17-22 and Matthew 1:1-6. Prepare a summary of why you think the book of Ruth ends the way it does. What is the significance of Ruth's inclusion in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus?

After about ten minutes reconvene the whole group and invite the sections to give their reports. Follow up the reports with a discussion of several of the following questions:

- *What do you think motivated the concern for racial purity among the Israelites?*
- *Why do you think this concern emerged in this particular situation?*
- *How likely is it that at this time not everyone in Israel shared Ezra and Nehemiah's "views"?*
- *What does the writer of Ruth believe about God's relation to people who are not Israelites?*
- *What does it mean to be part of the people of God according to Ezra and Nehemiah? According to Ruth? According to Matthew? According to people in your congregation?*

or

If your time is limited, use Dr. Rohrbaugh's comments and your own research to summarize the material assigned to each of the sections listed above. Lead the group through the material, inviting them to look at particular texts where you think that is appropriate. Then lead a discussion, using some of the questions printed above.

2. Learning about Mark. In the next session, the activities for *Practicing the Strategy* have to do with discipleship in Mark's Gospel. In preparation for those activities Dr. Rohrbaugh suggests members of the group use a variety of supplementary resources to answer four questions. Distribute copies of these questions to participants or list them on a chalkboard or newsprint where all can see them.

- *Who was the author of the Gospel of Mark?*
- *When was the book written?*
- *Why was the book written?*
- *What were the issues addressed by Mark?*

If you can locate several copies of introductions to the New Testament, Bible dictionaries and commentaries, form clusters of 3-4 participants and provide at least one resource for each cluster. Ask participants to take turns reading material from the resource(s) to their cluster and discuss answers to the above questions. They should record their answers to the questions and save them for the next session. Since you will be using this information in that session, you do not need to go over the answers at this time. However, you may want to invite participants to comment on the resources they used in the clusters.

or

If copies of the resources are not available for the clusters, make copies of the introduction to Mark from your study Bible or a Bible dictionary. Distribute the copies to group members and give them about five minutes to skim the material. Then invite people to offer answers to the above questions and encourage participants to record them for use at the next session.

CLOSING

1. Back to Basics. Call attention to the chart of the four *Working Assumptions* that you posted in the two earlier sessions. Invite members of the group to suggest which of these assumptions were evident in the analysis of the passages featured in this session.

Then present a summary of your notes from the earlier conversation with the group following Dr. Rohrbaugh's comment on the DVD about the importance of creating distance between ourselves and biblical texts. Ask participants whether the recent activities have changed their initial responses to his comment. If they have, in what way?

and

2. Read and Pray. Read Genesis 1:29-31, a summary of God's gracious gifts in creation, to the group and ask them to join you in singing the Gloria Patria. If you think they would feel comfortable sharing joys and concerns, invite them to do so before closing in prayer.

Looking Ahead

1. If you would like a member of the group to lead a prayer or a devotional activity at the next session, select a person for that task at the end of this session.
2. Remind participants that as part of their preparation for the next session, they are to make lists of the unique content in Matthew's and Luke's versions of the Parable of the Lost Sheep (see pages 34 to 36 in the *Resource Book*) and to review the literary contexts in which these Gospel writers place the parable.
3. If you were not able to include the activity on Mark in this group session, ask participants to prepare brief responses to the four questions about that Gospel for the next session, using the introductory article on Mark in a study Bible or a Bible dictionary.
4. In the activities described in *Practicing the Strategy* in the next session it is suggested that two members of the group present brief analyses (sixty to ninety seconds) of Mark 8:27-9:13 and Mark 10:17-52. If you plan to use this suggestion, recruit these persons at this session and refer them to Dr. Rohrbaugh's guidelines for this assignment on pages 43 and 44 in the *Resource Book*.

Resource 3A

GENESIS 1:1-2:4a

List the verses in which the following phrases appear:

And/then God said _____

And it was so _____

God saw that it was good/very good _____

And there was evening and there was morning _____

Describe what God creates on the days of the first week:

Name the Babylonian deities that were dethroned on the days of the first week:

Day one _____

Day two _____

Day three _____

Day four _____

Day five _____

Day six _____

**WORLDVIEW OR ATTITUDE
OF**

	ISRAEL	BABYLON	OUR COUNTRY
About CREATOR DEITIES			
About CREATION/ NATURE			
About the HUMAN Place in creation			
About LEADERS			
About the NATION			