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Exploring the Historical Setting

Summary

It is critically important to place biblical texts back in the historical setting out of which they came. That way we can understand what they were saying to people of their own time and avoid importing messages into them that are not there.

The great creation hymn in Genesis 1, one of the most profound texts in all of Scripture, spoke of the transcendence of God in the face of Babylonian attempts to claim supremacy for their gods and deify their nation. As the hymn was sung by Israelites, in bitter exile in the city of Babylon, it reminded them that God was the Lord and Creator of all.

INTRODUCING THE STRATEGY

When the Gospel of Luke reports (Luke 2:7) that the parents of Jesus could find no room in the “inn” at Bethlehem, it is not difficult for most Americans to mentally construct the scene. We do it from our modern experience of overbooked hotels or motels in crowded tourist locations. Thus we assume Mary and Joseph probably got to Bethlehem late and had to take what they could find.

That such a scenario is completely inappropriate, however, never dawns on many American readers. They simply do not know that ancient Bethlehem had no hotels, that advance reservations were an unknown phenomenon and, more importantly, that room in any village lodging was based on kinship or social rank rather than offered on a first-come-first-served basis. Finding no “place” likely meant that someone visiting Bethlehem that day outranked Jesus’ parents on the social scale and thus had first claim on the available space.¹

¹ Partly we are misled here by the unfortunate English translation “inn.” The Greek term Luke uses is actually the term for an “upper room,” that is, an extra room in a village house where visitors could be accommodated.

When you stop and think about it a bit, it should be obvious that a text written in the Greco-Roman world in the first century cannot be read the same way one might read a modern American document. Nor can one written in Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE be read in exactly the same way as one written in Rome around 60 CE. With the passage of time, words change their meanings, concepts are understood differently, even the emotional loading of words can be radically altered. We have already seen that the term “hills” meant one thing to an ancient Israelite and quite another to a skier in the mountains of Oregon. Over time, the meanings of words can change. Thus in the seventeenth century the English word “conversation” meant what our word “conduct” means now.²

Historical events change attitudes as well. Jewish attitudes toward the Romans changed markedly in 63 BCE when Pompey the Great conquered Israel and made it a Roman province. In the same way, American attitudes towards Germany and Japan are sharply different today from what they were in the 1940’s. If someone a millennium from now were to try to read twentieth-century American literature, it might be important to know if a text was written before or after World War II. Historical time and place are thus important background for anyone attempting to understand a written text.

Our thesis in this chapter is that taking a text out of its proper historical context can alter its meaning. That is no less true of the Bible than it is of the things we write in contemporary America.

Yahweh’s Song in a Foreign Land: Genesis 1:1–2:4a

If one were to pick up the creation story in Genesis 1 and read it for the first time, particularly if reading aloud, its stylized and stately language would make a lasting impression. Over and over in the text we read, “And God said. . .” —followed each time by the refrain, “and it was so.” Six times we are told that God looked at the divine handiwork and found that it was good. After the entire creation was finished, we read that “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” Moreover, each day’s creative activity is summed up with the rhythmic words, “And there was evening and there was morning, a . . . day.” (The Jewish day begins at sunset and runs until the sunset following.)

² The *King James Version* (1611 CE) translated James 3:13 this way: “Let him shew out of a good *conversation* his works with meekness and wisdom.” In the *New King James Version* (1982) it reads: “Let him show by good *conduct* that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.”

Such language is the language of litany, of prayer, of congregational hymn. Its liturgical character is even more pronounced in Hebrew than it is in English. It is the language of priests, of singers, of poets. It is above all language that belongs in worship, lifted as a hymn of praise to the creator God. So let us provisionally call this text a “creation hymn.”

We have chosen this creation hymn as our example of the importance of knowing the historical context of a biblical passage precisely because this passage has suffered more than most by being wrenched out of the time and place that gave it birth. For many people today it has become a point of departure for arguments over evolution and “scientific creationism.” It is frequently cited or dismissed by persons for whom the burning issue is how the world got here and how long it took to appear—an issue that has already consumed far more print than it deserves. The creation debate is one we shall leave to others. It will be enough to show that, set in its proper historical context, this hymn addressed a *religious* issue quite unlike any raised by modern science.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING

If biblical scholars are correct, and there is now a very wide consensus, the creation hymn in Genesis 1 is the work of the priests of Israel at the time of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE. To see the importance of this, we need to know a little about Israelite history.

The exile of the Jews to Babylon was a shattering blow. Actually the deportation happened in three stages, the first in 597 BCE and the last about 15 years later. The result was that a substantial portion of the Jewish population was carried into captivity, hundreds of miles from their homeland. In 2 Kings 24:14 we are told that, “He carried away all Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand captives, all the artisans and the smiths; no one remained, except the poorest people of the land.”

The idea was that, stripped of its ablest citizens, the Israelite nation would not again present a serious threat to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. Torn from their homes and living in a foreign land, these Israelite exiles remained in captivity until the Persians conquered Babylon and allowed the first of them to return home about 537 BCE.

We get a glimpse of the bitterness these Israelites felt during the long years of exile by reading **Psalm 137:1-6**:

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors
asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the LORD’s song
In a foreign land?

That was exactly the problem. How could they sing the Lord’s song outside Jerusalem? How could they sing with no temple? (See the poetic, yet graphic description of the destruction of the temple in Psalm 74:2-8.) Even more, how were they to prevent the loss of their Jewish heritage and faith in the midst of the alien Babylonian surroundings?

It was not that life for the exiles was terribly harsh. Both biblical and archaeological evidence suggest that the Israelites living in Babylon prospered. But the prosperity itself was part of the problem. In the face of growing comfort and satisfaction with life in Babylon, what would become of God’s covenant with Abraham? Of the covenant at Sinai? Of the promised land? Or of their hopes for the fulfillment of God’s promises in the future? Given the widespread belief of that period that all gods were local deities who exercised control in no more than their own territories, what were the Israelites of the exile to conclude? Was Yahweh no more than another local god? Was his territory limited to Palestine? Were the Israelites now under the influence of the Babylonian god Marduk?

By comparison with the city of Jerusalem, the splendid temples and rich culture of sixth-century Babylon would have seemed magnificent indeed. The temptation for the Israelites would thus have been to conclude that Babylon’s Marduk, not Israel’s Yahweh, was the god to worship. The greatest danger was that over time the religious faith of Israel, severed from its historic foundations in Jerusalem and God’s temple, would simply be overwhelmed by the people’s assimilation to Babylonian culture.

It is no accident, therefore, that the priests of Israel collected, collated, reworked and organized their Israelite traditions during the period of the Babylonian exile. Much of what we now call the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) was collected and edited during this period as a way of keeping the Israelite heritage alive. To older historical narratives, the priests added the cultic, legal, and liturgical materials that are now scattered throughout the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and

Deuteronomy. One of the many things they added was a beautiful liturgical hymn to God the Creator. True, there was already a creation story in the collection (Genesis 2:4b-3:24), but this new hymn was not only added, it was placed at the head of the entire collection. Why that is so can be seen from the historical context we have been describing.

BABYLONIAN CREATION IDEAS

The Babylonian story of creation would almost certainly have been part of the dangerous influence that threatened the faith of the exiles. It was called the *Enuma Elish* and was read annually at the great New Year's festival of the city of Babylon. It was one of the most widespread myths of the ancient world, and stood in direct contradiction to the religious understanding Israel held about the created world.

In the *Enuma Elish*, the world is created as the result of a great war among the gods and goddesses of the Babylonian pantheon. Tiamat, the great ocean goddess, is killed by the sun god Marduk, chief god of the city of Babylon. From Tiamat's body are created the heavens and the earth, and from the blood of Kingu, one of her defeated henchmen, humankind is created to do menial service for the gods.

All of the Babylonian gods were nature divinities. There were gods of sun, moon and stars, of fields and grain, of nearly everything in the natural world a Babylonian encountered. The implication of this is that because nature is deified, nature becomes the ultimate reality over against which life is to be lived. In Babylonian eyes, what was natural was what was right. Moreover, because life was viewed as a purely natural process, it was expected to evidence all of the catastrophes that occur in the natural world. If the forces of nature clash, it is natural for human forces to do the same. Much of the conflict the *Enuma Elish* describes is fighting that goes on between gods and goddesses, that is, between the great male and female principles at the heart of the Babylonian view of nature. What else could one expect, then, except the same kind of conflict among human beings?

It is over against this type of background that the priests of Israel brought forward their creation hymn to the one Creator of all. The issue for them was not a scientific accounting of how the world came to be, but the threat of the polytheistic idolatry of the Babylonian culture to the faith of Israel. A close look at the content of the hymn will reveal how forcefully it spoke to that historical time and place.

"IN THE BEGINNING. . ."

The first thing we see in the Genesis account is the radical distinction between the Creator and the creation. Only God is "in the beginning." Moreover, God is not the world and the world is not God. Instantly nature is dethroned and demystified. Affect us it might, but it is neither the ultimate condition of life nor that to which we are finally responsible. The

God of Genesis stands alone, *transcendent*, at the beginning. To this God alone the whole creation stands subordinate.

Not only is nature dethroned, so is Marduk—and by implication his nation as well (Marduk was the Babylonian sun god). In Genesis 1 the sun is not divine, but a mere creation of Yahweh. The Babylonian idolatry of nature had its counterpart in the idolatry of empire. Babylon, Egypt, Assyria, and the other great empires that crushed Israel repeatedly throughout her bitter history all operated on the assumption that what was true in the heavens should be true on earth. If Marduk was victorious in the celestial battle of the gods, so Babylon would and should be victorious in the struggles on earth. Idolatry of nature quickly became idolatry of nation.

In this light it becomes clearer that the Genesis hymn of creation, from virtually the initial line of the poem, is a stinging rebuke of Babylonian politics as well as Babylonian religion. No one is transcendent but God alone. Israel may have been defeated, she may have been carried far from the beloved hills of Zion, but the God of Israel is still the Lord of the entire world. No political empire, even one as powerful as Babylon, stood outside the ultimate control of the Creator.

Note how in Genesis 1 the deities of Babylonian religion are one by one dismissed to the level of ordinary creation. On the first day, the so-called gods of light and darkness are dethroned. On the second day, it is the gods of sky and sea, the primary warring divinities of the *Enuma Elish*. On the third day it is the “gods” of dry land and vegetation who are deposed. On the fourth, the sun, moon and stars, all key gods or goddesses of Babylonian cities, are unseated. On the fifth and sixth days, members of the animal kingdom (the principal gods of Egypt!) are put in their place. And last of all, humankind, the proud creature so prone to self-deification, is set firmly in the created order. One by one the idols of Babylonian culture are brought low, and humankind is left to serve God alone.

One more key point can be made as we compare the Genesis hymn with the *Enuma Elish*. In the Babylonian epic, humankind is created because the defeated gods in the celestial war are tired of serving their conquerors. Human beings are created to take the places of these defeated gods as menial servants of the victorious gods and goddesses, a status that implies something less than dignity for the human race. By contrast, in Genesis human beings are created in the image of God. God they are not, but neither are they slaves to the whims of nature.

In a direct repudiation of the Babylonian worldview, human beings are given dominion over the rest of what God has created. Nor do they fight with each other. Male and female are equally created in the image of God, and nowhere is it assumed that a natural animosity exists between them. Conflict may exist in the human sphere, but that, as the second

Genesis creation story (Gen 2:4b-3:24) tells us, is the result of sin. It is not the way things were created; hence it cannot be considered “natural.” Humankind is thus given a kind of dignity unknown to the Babylonians (except, perhaps, the king!). Once again the *Enuma Elish* has been directly challenged.

THE GREAT CREATION HYMN

Seeing this remarkable hymn *in its proper historical context* makes a fundamental difference in how we interpret it. If we ask what song is to be sung in Babylon, then the answer of the priests of Israel is that we must sing this song. Not any other; *this* one. It is not a scientific account of anything, much less of the way the world began. It is a liturgical hymn meant for the worship of Israel, meant for Israelite exiles tempted by the overwhelming presence of Babylonian culture. It is meant as a way to confess ultimate faith in the God who is Lord of Israel, Babylon, and everything in between.

THEIR WORLD—OUR WORLD

Uncovering the historical setting of a biblical text is simultaneously an exercise in creating distance and overcoming it. We today do not live with neighbors holding the Babylonian worldview; hence we cannot use the Genesis creation hymn in quite the same way as did our Israelite forebears. We live at a substantial distance from that polytheistic world.

Yet at the same time, to learn about the Babylonian view and the way the Genesis creation hymn is a direct challenge to it is to hear the Bible speaking to a real world in a real time and place. We begin to hear the Bible’s end of the conversation on its own terms, speaking in its own way to the needs and issues of its own time. We can avoid making the text say what it appears on the surface to say to a twenty-first-century reader and may ask instead what it said to the people for whom it was first written. Moreover, having done that, we can go on to ask if what the text once said (heard now with new concern for what that was) is what it continues to say in our contemporary world.

The Genesis creation hymn nicely illustrates this double-edged character of a concern for historical context. The more we learn about the issues of the exilic period, the farther from our world the text threatens to move. But having learned what those issues were, we are then in a position to let the Bible speak about those same issues once again. We can avoid forcing spurious issues onto the text (How did the world get here and how long did it take?) and let it speak to us on its own terms.

What we may then discover is that the text moves back into our world very quickly. It begins to say what its authors intended to say rather than what we wish to hear. Many of the issues the creation hymn was speaking to are very much alive in our day. It is just that they do not get much attention from those caught up in the debate over evolution, or from those who read the text without concern for its original historical setting.

Think about the issue of the transcendence of God. If God is not the world, and if nothing in the world is God, what pretensions of ours might that dethrone? Do human beings today not have the same tendency the Babylonians did to deify their political structures or assume they have divine blessing? Are we not as inclined as they to make an idolatry of human societies?

And what about the issue of human dignity? Our world may not consider the human race a divine afterthought created to relieve lazy gods, but threats to the dignity of human beings abound in our world. We could well ask what it means to be created in the image of God and what implications that has for the way human beings treat each other today.

Then there is the issue of nature. We may be less in danger of succumbing to its whims (a constant fear in the climatic conditions of ancient Babylon) than of letting our dominion over it get out of hand. We may have run up against the limits of that dominion in ways that make clear once again that it is God, not we, who exercises ultimate control.

Finally, embedded in the controversy between Genesis and the worldview of Babylon is the enormous issue of whether what is natural is what is right. Is it? Do we measure our lives by the natural way of doing things? Or by the will of God? A Babylonian assumed that because nature was divine those two were one and the same. But the priests of Israel, seeing the radical distinction between God and the creation, understood that our responsibility is to God alone. A “natural” ethic assumed that those who were born with the strongest bodies and sharpest minds should naturally rule. In Israel, rule belonged to God alone.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORICAL SETTING

Setting this Genesis creation hymn in the world of the sixth century BCE has not destroyed its relevance to our modern era. It has rather made clear what the text actually says. Once that step has been taken, we are in a position to let it speak its own message rather than one we import into it.

Our study has shown that learning the historical setting of a biblical text is critical if we are to enlarge our reservoir of common understanding with the biblical writers. “Historical setting” is among the most important tools available to us for sound biblical interpretation. In our subsequent work, we will assume it as an essential part of the task we undertake.

PRACTICING THE STRATEGY

Our purpose in this chapter has been to see how the historical setting in which a biblical passage is read can influence the way we understand it. We say that Genesis 1, read over against the religious and political realities of the Babylonian captivity, sounds very different than when it is read in the context of modern arguments over the origin of the universe. Our primary concern here is to let a text speak to us on its terms rather than ours.

Learning to use the historical setting as an aid to interpreting a biblical text is an important strategy in enlarging the common ground between ourselves and the biblical writers. Here are two suggestions for practicing that strategy. If you are working on your own, glance through the material and decide which activities you will complete. If you are participating in a study group, your leader will work with the group to decide how to proceed with this section.

First Activity

A wide variety of scholarly resources is available to aid us in learning about the historical background of a biblical text. You will find several of them listed in Appendix 2 at the back of the *Resource Book* under the title **Learning Resources**. Before we suggest how to use the resources listed, however, we want to illustrate how the Bible itself is a key resource for this task. We can do that by using one part of the Bible to help us understand another. In our first example we will use the Old Testament book of Ruth.

In our present Bibles this book is located between Judges and 1 Samuel. The probable reason for this is that it tells a story about the ancestors of David, the major character in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. A review of the introduction to Ruth in a study Bible such as the *Oxford Annotated NRSV*, or a survey of the information on the book of Ruth in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, reveals that the book is often dated much later than David's time and was probably composed following the Babylonian exile in the fifth or fourth century BCE.

This conclusion is supported by a variety of factors. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, Ruth is not linked to Judges and the historical books but is included among the later books known as the "Writings." From the nature of the book it becomes clear that one purpose of the story was to create a sympathetic attitude toward foreigners who had become part of the Hebrew community. This purpose is well suited to counteract the tendency toward exclusiveness in Israel following the exile. Furthermore, the explanation of a former social custom in Ruth 4:7 implies that the practice had long since dropped out of public life

(compare Deuteronomy 25:9). Keeping this information in mind, let us review parts of Ezra and Nehemiah to gain insight into life in Israel after the return from exile. We are trying to learn a bit about the historical setting in which the book of Ruth was written.

1. **Read Ezra 1.** This chapter tells how Cyrus, the Persian king who conquered Babylon, allowed the Jewish exiles to return home to Jerusalem.
2. **Ezra 3:8-6:22** describes the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. You may not want to read all of this section, but at least take a careful look at **6:20-22**. Note both the joy at the renewed worship in the temple and the concern to purify the returnees from “the pollutions of the nations of the land” (6:21). These people of the land were those the exiles found living in Israel upon their return.
3. Now **read Ezra 9 and 10.** Here we get a stunning account of the marriage policies of Ezra and his concern for racial purity. At about this same time another Israelite returnee, Nehemiah, worked at rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. We can see in the accounts of his work this same prohibition against intermarriage. **Read Nehemiah 13:1-3, 23-27.** Compare this with **Deuteronomy 23:3**.
4. Now ask yourself the following questions:

What do you think motivated this concern for racial purity?

What purpose did it serve?

Why did it emerge in this particular situation?

5. With this background, we are in a position to see the book of Ruth in a new light. Read the book carefully, noting especially **4:17-22**.
6. If it is correct that Ruth was written during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah, several questions arise immediately:

Is it possible that not everyone in Israel shared the views of Ezra and Nehemiah?

Is Ruth a reaction against the narrow view of racial purity?

What does the writer of Ruth believe about God?

Is God the God of all people, including Moabites?

What does it mean to be part of the people of God according to Ezra/Nehemiah?

According to Ruth?

7. In addition to broader questions like these, we may also ask how we are to read a specific text in Ruth in light of our study. Reread Ruth 4:17-22. Why does the book end this way? What is the significance of the fact that one of David’s ancestors was a Moabite? **Read Matthew 1:1-6.** Do you see any significance in Ruth 4:17-22 being carried over into the story of Jesus?

The book of Ruth may present what seems like a timeless, charming story. But it is also a very pointed statement of the universality of God and a rejection of notions of racial purity. Reading it in the historical context of Ezra's and Nehemiah's marriage policies helps us understand that.

Second Activity

The suggestion for further study above asked you to see how certain Scriptures often provide the background for reading other Scriptures. Much of our understanding of the historical setting of the Bible, however, can be found only in secondary resources. In addition to a study Bible and the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* mentioned above, several other volumes will be especially helpful. As indicated above, a brief description of a few of these is found later in this study. Since the multi-volume resources are quite expensive, you may find that your church library or a public library has copies you can use. In the exercise that follows, you are encouraged to use as many of these resources as you can and to compare the different forms and types of information they provide (of course, the pertinent sections of these books would also be useful for the first activity described above).

The texts we will be working with in the "Practicing the Strategy" section of the next chapter are from the Gospel of Mark. As a way of becoming familiar with secondary resources, and as preparation for your next study, read the material indicated in one or more of the books listed below. Write out brief answers to these questions:

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?

SECONDARY RESOURCES

These are some resources that could help you answer the above questions. Pick one of the three to look for background on the Gospel of Mark.

1. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible.*

This is what is called a "study Bible" because it has brief explanatory footnotes on the text. It also has short background articles on the first page of each book of the Bible. You might begin here by reading the one on the Gospel of Mark.

2. Paul J. Achtemeier, *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, rev. ed. (1996).*

Bible dictionaries are organized alphabetically, just like encyclopedias. If you do not have this one, look for an up-to-date alternative in your church or community library. Read the article on Mark's Gospel.

3. C. Black, D.M. Smith, and R.A. Spivey, *Anatomy of the New Testament: A Guide to Its Structure and Meaning, 6th ed. (2007).*

This is an "introduction" to the New Testament. Its primary purpose is to set the books of the New Testament in their proper historical context. Read the chapter on the Gospel of Mark. (For more on Old and New Testament introductions see the list of **Learning Resources** in Appendix 2 at the end of this book. **Note:** you can look there for the Old Testament introduction titled, *Understanding the Old Testament* for valuable information about the book of Ruth.)

4. *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary, rev. ed. (2000).*

Commentaries provide verse-by-verse notes on the contents of the Bible. This particular volume includes general articles along with an introduction to and commentary on each book of the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha. Read the introduction to Mark.

OTHER RESOURCES

If you are not able to locate these books in your church or public library, perhaps you can find other comparable study Bibles, Bible dictionaries, introductions and commentaries.